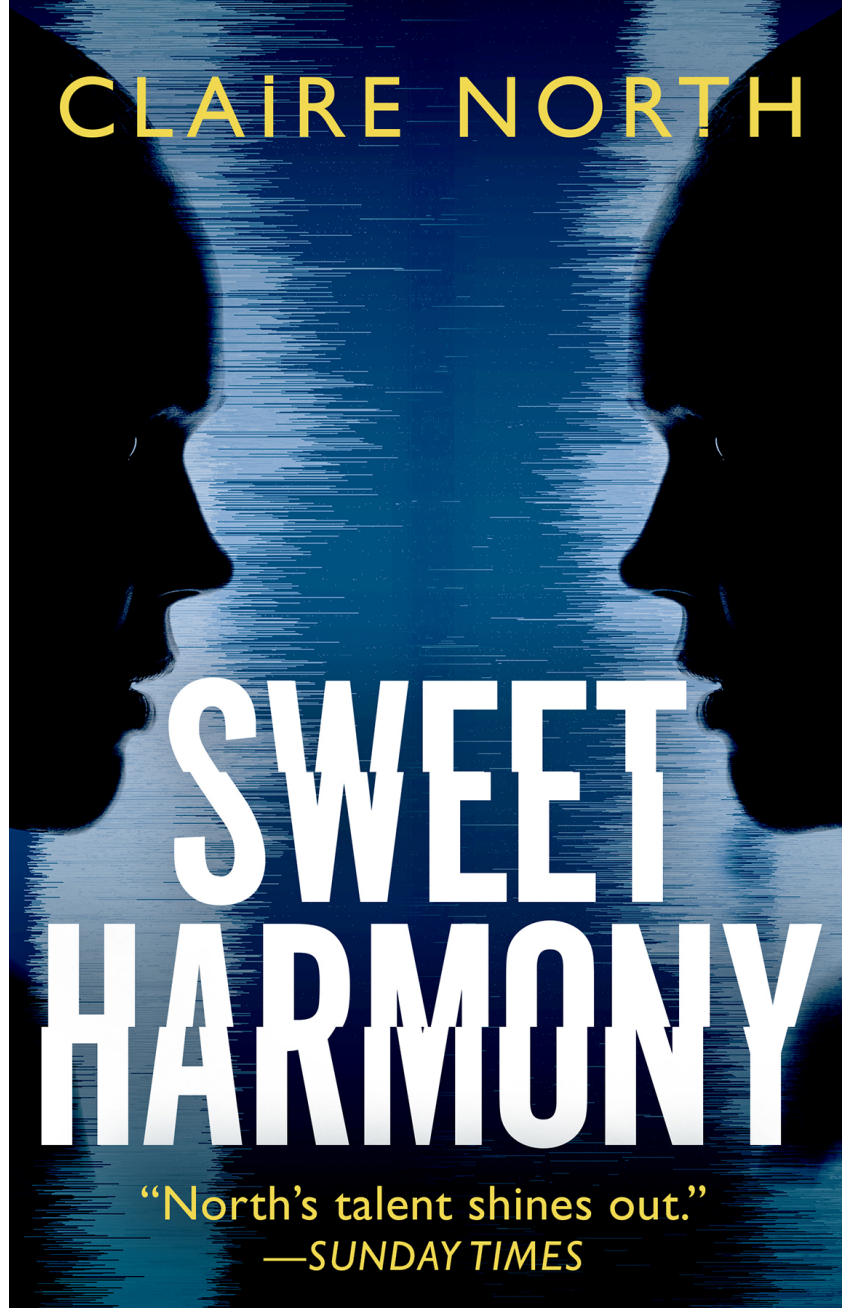




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SWEET HARMONY

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Sweet Harmony

Claire North



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Orbit

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10104

www.orbitbooks.net

First eBook Edition: September 2020

Simultaneously published in Great Britain by Orbit

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ISBN: 978-0-316-49887-6

E3-20200812-PDJ-PC-REV

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Chapter 1

The pimple on her chin was the first sign that the debt was out of control.

“Pimple” was kind. “Pimple” was what the pharmacist called it when Harmony, in a hushed whisper and dark sunglasses, asked for some kind of cream, something that might erase all trace of it as magically as it had appeared.

It was, in fact, a spot. A single, bulging, red-rimmed spot, popping with yellow pus beneath a sliver of translucent skin, thin as cobweb. She googled “I have a spot” and read with growing horror of hormone imbalances, blocked pores, sebum and oil, and of a thousand solutions ranging from lasers to pastes of liquefied kale and garlic. Even in the height of panic, she knew that this was absurd, and cleared her browsing history in case someone found the search.

She made it forty minutes before her relentless fumbling caused it to burst. Once it had, she couldn’t stop poking at it, unable to look away from the shameful eruption. Soon it was bleeding, and she didn’t know if that was better or worse. She daubed the throbbing red mark with antiseptic, and phoned work to take the day off.

“I . . . my mum is . . . I’ve got to go and . . . It’s my mum, you see.”

“What’s the matter with your mum?”

“Nothing, nothing. I mean, not nothing. She’s had—The doctor called and said I had to go and see her.”

“If it’s nothing then why . . . ?”

“You know she had a stroke, I mean, a few months ago. It’s to do with that. They wouldn’t tell me much over the phone.”

“You’ve got the Moores at 3 p.m.”

“Right. Yes. Could James . . . ? I mean, I can send him the file – it’s . . . and the keys are . . . shit, the keys are . . . Look, maybe I can

drop by on the way to uh . . . to my mum . . . ”

She felt a little bad using her mum as an excuse, but only for a moment. Parents understood these sorts of things; they knew what mattered and what didn't. Karen Meads wouldn't have minded Harmony using her name in vain, as long as it was for the right thing.

On the other end of the line, Graham was unconvinced. “We need you back first thing tomorrow, and you're working a Saturday for me.”

“Yeah, OK . . . yeah.”

Harmony hung up and sat alone, staring into the small square mirror on the wall by the bed. Her well-proportioned, cosy one-bedroom apartment, as she would have described it to any sucker foolish enough to rent, was at the top of an extension on the back of a family house in Streatham, which had been converted some fifteen years ago into six convenient, well-appointed flats for the modern professional. The wallpaper was faded red; the carpet was string and blue fluff. It cost more per week than her old place in Reading had for a month, and she wasn't sure if the black mould in the bathroom had been killed by the chlorine spray, or just bleached a faded grey.

She thought back to her conversation with Graham and wondered how she'd get keys to James without anyone at the office seeing her face. She felt like a foolish child, her lie ridiculous and easily exposed. Harmony Meads wasn't usually stuck for words. It was as if this single offending rupture in her flesh had robbed her of her gifts of speech, an arrow to her Achilles heel. She knew she should get up, get moving, find some way of solving this, and for nearly seven minutes she leaned in close, prodding and squeezing at the rim of the offending mark, and was horrified when, having doused it in antiseptic and the pharmacist's cream, her poking produced a tiny curl of white gunk from beneath her flesh. It looked like cream cheese, or old mayonnaise. The soft substance was less than two millimetres in length, but held close to her face she could have sworn it was gigantic, the first sign of something alien, unnatural, a dead maggot of fat growing beneath her skin.

She washed her hands three times and called her healthcare provider.

“Hi, you're through to Fullife—”

“My name is Harmony Meads. I'm . . . ”

“ . . . Please press one for upgrades and in-app purchases, two for technical support, three for . . . ”

Harmony swore more violently and deeply than she had for a very long time, and held the phone to her ear as the cheerful, gently Scottish voice – Wasn't Scottish the accent of honest reassurance? – exclaimed how important her call was to them, and in between synthetic, sunshine-syrup music, pitched the latest in cellulite reduction upgrades.

“Sometimes exercise isn't enough, but don't worry – there's a solution to flabby thighs and floppy skin! Introducing Cellublast, the latest upgrade from Fullife Healthcare. Our nanos will have you looking strong and pert within two weeks from activation. Now with forty per cent off I Love My Knees when you buy two fat-blasting packages for a limited period only!”

When Harmony finally got through to someone, she wasn't Scottish at all, but sounded Brum and unhappy with her life choices.

“You're through to Emily. How can I help you?”

“Hi, my name is Harmony Meads. There's something wrong with my nanos.”

“Harmony Meads, yeah. Can I get a postcode please and the first and third letters of your memorable word? Hi, yeah, I can see your account details here. What's the problem?”

“There's a fault with my nanos. I think that . . . ”

Now, for the first time, the magnitude of what she was saying hit her, and Harmony nearly slid into the toilet, where somehow she'd managed to plant herself at the exact moment that the call went through, caught between bedroom and bathroom mirrors.

At the centre of her soul, a darkness opened up, and the machines in the hospitals played their songs at her, and the fluorescent lights were pure whiteness overhead and in her dreams the nanos were singing, singing, singing, as they ate her alive from the inside out.

“I . . . I have a spot,” she blurted before the terror could take her. “I think that maybe . . . I tried running a diagnostic but my control panel wasn't working: it keeps saying there's a login error. There was an incident a few months ago, a malfunction with my nanos. I had to go to hospital; there were . . . there was an error in the programming, and now I have a spot. You need to fix this.”

“Please hold.”

She was held in silence – no music, no ads, just the absolute silence that surrounds a shrouded iceberg on a moonless night – for nearly six minutes, and thought she'd been cut off and should try calling back, when Emily returned to the line.

“Hi, yeah, I can see what the issue is. I'm going to transfer you over to debt management.”

“No, but I—”

The line went silent. This time there was something that had once been a tune, transformed into a synthetic nursery doodle of sound, and still no ads. That lasted three minutes before a much more upbeat, cheerful voice exclaimed, so much louder than Emily that Harmony nearly dropped the phone:

“Good morning, Ms Meads; my name is Gillian! How are you today?”

A flood of relief. Gillian was a kind, caring human, who'd make everything better. This was apparent from twelve words of Yorkshire chipper, two dozen syllables of compassionate interest in all the problems of Harmony's life, which were, if she was honest with herself, legion. “I want to report a problem with my nanos.”

“Oh no, what kind of problem?”

“I've . . . I've *got a spot*.” Even in the relative privacy of her bathroom, a cupboard-sized cell with pipes that carried the arguments of Mr and Mrs Patel in No. 1 up and the weed-stenched cushion of Hailey and Phuong's gaming marathons in No. 2 down, she whispered the words.

“Say again, Ms Meads?”

A little louder, her humiliation given voice. She shielded her phone from the vent above the sink through which all sound travelled, including Mr Patel's morning shower rendition of “When I'm cleaning windows”, and hissed, “I've *got a spot*.”

“Ah yes, I can see how that might happen.”

“Are my nanos malfunctioning? Do I need to go to hospital? Is there a programming error? Are they . . . doing things? Can you diagnose that from where you are?”

“No, no, Ms Meads, no need to worry at all. I can see your account details and your nanos are running perfectly fine. What's happening is that some of your boosts are being shut down, including Dermaglow, which might explain this incident. There's an adjustment period.”

“What do you mean, shutting down?”

Now her voice was rising in anger, indignation. She'd imagined many causes for this calamity, ranging from a massive malfunction that was at this precise point liquefying her organs from the inside out, through to the first signs of an infection she didn't have coverage against – leprosy perhaps, whatever that was. Gillian's explanation had not featured in any of these fantasies.

“Looking at it . . . Ah yes, so there's a few boosts that will be shutting down in the next twenty-four hours, including Dermaglow, Rise and Shine, Fresh and Perky, Powerful Poise . . .”

“All right, I'm going to stop you there Gillian – Gillian, was it? Gillian, I've got to stop you. I haven't authorised this. I haven't . . . I have a contract and I've been letting a lot of services lapse I know – but shutting down is absolutely unacceptable; these upgrades are . . .”

“Ms Meads, I'm very sorry, but you are several months behind in your payments to Fullife and until payment is received, we are obliged to shut down non-essential services.”

At the black hole that lay at the centre of the spinning galaxy of her life, Harmony Meads felt her world collapse.

There were questions she should ask.

There were things she needed to say.

Arguments to have.

She thought she should shout, curse this stupid fucking woman in wherever she fucking was, tell her to check again, tell her that she was wrong, that it was all wrong, that this wasn't how it went, to fix this fuck-up right fucking now.

Instead, she felt strangely grateful, and wondered if this was why cancer patients always said thank you to the doctor who told them they were going to die. She knew that this was her fault. All of it – all of it her fault.

“How far behind?”

“Ms Meads, I am authorised to discuss a repayment plan with you. Your debt to Fullife is currently in excess of £250, with an additional penalty of £200 for late payment. If this sum continues unpaid in the next six weeks, I'm afraid we are licensed to initiate punitive financial reclamation services. Are you able to make the payment now?”

“I . . . no.” Finally, here it comes. Here comes the truth, the realisation of what it is, hitting her like a spot on the chin, an explosion of blood and pus in the night, her body splitting open and

splattering with the harsh reality that she is just flesh, tissue and the shining, shimmering fluids that slither in between.

“Ms Meads, I have to tell you that your contract has you tied into payments for the next four years, so unless you can pay the termination fee of £750 for all services, your debt will only continue to worsen until you reach the cut-off of £1000, at which point you will go into punitive measures by default.”

Harmony was wrong. Gillian is not a kind woman. She is not warm and compassionate. She is the evil matron at school who smiles sugar and puppies on the parents’ open days, who calls the children “lovely little kiddies” and beams with delighted glee as she makes them stand in the idiot’s corner. She is the one who whips you for your own good, and enjoys giving out moral retribution. Harmony can’t believe she missed it before.

A question, surfacing from deep within her psyche. She remembered this experience – the utter paralysis of thought – from the hospital. Everything she needed to say only occurred to her later, when she could breathe again, but this . . .

“What are punitive financial reclamation services?”

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to refer you to your contract.”

“But you . . . you know what that means?”

A little sigh. The children are being difficult again, but that’s OK. Gillian is magnanimous about these things. “Our licence to provide nano healthcare in your body requires that we maintain all essential systems in good working order. That means your basic immunisation, cardiac and neurological packages will remain fully operative until the contract lapses or the termination fee goes through. After all, it’s in no one’s interest if you get ill, is it?” A little laugh – Gillian does like her job, she actually fucking likes it; she *likes* telling people about this, she finds it very interesting, despite knowing somewhere deep down inside that this probably makes her weird. “However, we are licensed to shut down non-essential systems until payment is received. Currently this means suspension of all your boosts, and I’m sorry to say you may experience some side effects as your body readjusts to having minimal nano support . . .”

“What side effects?”

“Well . . . your spot, for example. If you continue in non-payment, the nanos will also start to shut down other non-essential systems. These can include, but are not limited to, smell, libido,

allergen protection, colour sensitivity, frequency sensitivity, dental protection, taste, fat processing, cellulose processing, hair growth, hair loss . . . ”

Finally, Harmony wept.

She had thought that she was stronger than that, that the world had thrown all it could at her already and she had triumphed, that she had grown and become invincible from her sufferings.

Turns out she was wrong.

Gillian waited patiently for a little while. A lot of people cried at her down the phone. It was part of the job. She prided herself on how sensitive and motherly she was.

Then: “Is there someone you could borrow the money from?”

This was not the correct question. Harmony threw her phone into the toilet with a scream of rage, tore at her hair, clawed at her face, howled loud enough to bring Phuong and Hailey knocking on her door with a cry of, “Harmony? You OK in there?”

“Yeah, I’m . . . I’m fine, I’m . . . ”

The shame of their curiosity, the humiliation of their kindness, calmed her down a little bit, though she didn’t open the door to their polite concern. She went back to the bathroom and fished her phone out of the toilet, drying it off with tissue paper. Not that it made a difference – it never booted up again.

Chapter 2

Nearly nine years before Harmony Meads woke up to a pimple on her chin, the teenager who would be the woman lay on her back on a lumpy single bed in a hall of residence in Reading and mumbled, a little late into the proceedings but a microsecond before it was going to cease to be relevant, “Have you got a condom?”

Jarek, twenty, a third-year BA to Harmony’s first and therefore clearly skilled in the ways of life and love, froze, body drawn in a long arch above hers, poised in every way she’d always imagined, hoped for and quietly feared, then blurted, “What?”

The point of university, Harmony knew, was to lose your virginity. It was, if anything, a more important experience than getting any kind of degree – what her mum would have called “living your life” with an approving nod, even if she’d never let her imagination run to how her daughter would interpret this command. Knowing that this needed accomplishing if she was ever to be a woman – experiencing the same wild sexual delights as her schoolfriends had probably, perhaps, if you believed them – she had set about finding the perfect man for the task. Her first effort, with a Master’s student called Benji, had ended with him passed out diagonally across her bed, snoring with mighty beer-blasting stench, while she huddled in a tiny triangle of mattress left by the shape of the sprawling of his limbs, not even down to her one sexy bra, which she’d worn especially despite the fact it pinched.

Jarek had been much more promising, and though he wasn’t quite everything she’d imagined, she was so determined to achieve her objective that she was willing to overlook his obvious flaws, including the fact that he stank of cigarettes and she didn’t really like kissing him on the mouth, or that he kept on pinching her really hard like that was a sexy thing. She knew that this moment was going to be magical, so magical it damn well would be, and that thought did as much for the moment as any actual attraction.

The fact that she was still in a decent state of mind to blurt “Do you have a condom?” was perhaps indicative of a certain gap between fantasy and reality, but she was still proud of herself that even in a dizzy of sexual delight, with a third-year student no less, she had a good head on her shoulders.

“What?”

Her confidence, so hard to muster, so brief to burn, flickered and died at his expression, his rigid form. “A . . . condom. Have you got a condom?”

Astonishment. She’d prepped herself for many things – for “But, babe, I prefer it more natural” – and was perfectly prepared to explain how it was her body, her choice, and yes, even call it off if he disrespected her opinion, magic or no. But surprise, an absolute, genuine incredulity . . . She had nothing ready for that, and was suddenly a naked girl in a room that smelled of drying laundry and boy sweat, her breasts flopping awkwardly to either side, her thighs aching, as sexually empowered as a poppadum.

For a moment, the two of them stayed locked there, each waiting for the other to crack first, to breach the gulf of understanding between them. Finally, Jarek cracked, “Don’t you have upgrades?”

“I . . . uh, I mean . . . ”

“Are you a naturalist?”

“What? No, I’ve got . . . I mean, I’ve got nanos . . . I’m not like . . . ”

“But you don’t have upgrades?”

“I . . . uh, no, I don’t, I mean, it’s just . . . I’ve got the basic but not . . . ”

With a grunt, he hauled himself off her and, muttering something she couldn’t hear, fumbled among the discarded clothes on the floor for his jeans, then his wallet, while her skin gently cooled and little goosebumps began to stand up on the outside of her arms.

He found a condom at the bottom of his wallet. He wasn’t sure how long it had been there, and fitted it awkwardly, not looking at her. The sex was more uncomfortable than she’d expected, and though it was, you know, kinda nice, and definitely informative, definitely woman-making, enlightening, she wasn’t sure if it was . . . but then she was still young and had a lot to learn, and next time she knew it would be much better.

After, they lay, her squelched up to the wall, him half hanging off the side of the bed. She wondered if she should say something, like she loved him, or thank you, or something stupid like that. She couldn't think of anything that wasn't unbelievably trite, and said nothing.

Finally, he rolled out of bed, pulled on his jeans, shirt, put his wallet back in his pocket, all without turning the light on or speaking a word. She rolled on to one side to watch him. "Aren't you . . . Don't you want to stay the night?"

A shake of his head. "I've got a class tomorrow morning."

"I could set an alarm."

Another shake. "I'm gonna go."

"It was . . . I mean, it was really nice, I'm . . . we should . . . another time, you know?"

A half nod. "Yeah. That'd be . . . Yeah."

He let himself out without meeting her eye, didn't answer her calls for the rest of the week and finally blocked her on Facebook.

Chapter 3

This is Harmony Meads, nineteen years old.

Five foot eight, she is blessed with long blonde hair that she once tried washing in olive oil, because that was a thing you were supposed to do, until her mum caught her and hollered, “What the hell are you doing with my salad oil, girl?!” after which, and not without a certain amount of relief given what a mess it made, she went back to normal shampoo and conditioner.

Her hair, when worn loose, goes down to her waist, but it also tangles really quickly and takes a lot of looking after, so she usually wears it in a plait because that looks kind of assertive and practical, but also feminine, with what her friend Jenni would probably call “a promise of good things to come”.

Until she was seventeen years old she had to wear braces, and hated the feel of them, and hated that everyone laughed at her. As a result, she learned to smile without opening her mouth until the day they came off. Then she wasn't sure how to smile – if she was revealing her beautiful, perfectly aligned white dazzler of a grin, or maintaining her delicate near-simper. For hours, she stood in front of the mirror, practising the contortions of her face, trying to find the combination of powerful, strong, funny, witty, droll, dry, sarcastic, knowing, excited, naive and charming that a woman's smile ought to convey.

The effect was mixed, and even now, two years later, the joy that illuminates her face is tempered by caution, restraint, as if fearful of splitting her blushing skin with something ugly.

She is not fat; she is not thin.

She likes her wrists; she can wrap her thumb and little finger round them to almost halfway up her arm, but they're not ill-skinny, not just hanging sticks off brittle shoulders. She doesn't like the way her bum sticks out; knows it's because she genuinely does have big hips, an actual genetic thing, but also understands that

when she says it out loud people laugh, because “big boned” doesn’t mean “big boned” any more, even if you do, in fact, have big bones.

Her eyes are grey-green. She has a mole on her left shoulder, which will be dissolved into perfect, silken flesh by her nanos when she is twenty-six, and start to regrow with a tuft of black hairs in the centre of it when she is twenty-nine.

But this is in the future, in the time when the machines are dreaming, and Harmony Meads sleeps.

For now, she reads online guides on how to be beautiful, sexy and successful, and understands that all these things come from within, and isn’t sure if she has it inside her, but is damned if the world is going to find that out.

Chapter 4

Harmony had nanos for as long as she could remember.

Apparently, once, when she was a very small child, she'd got a cold. This had been when her dad was still alive, before the nanos were entirely reliable and the software hadn't been released to cover some of the harder diseases like TB or influenza. Her parents had rushed her to hospital, transfixed by the horrendous amounts of snot and bright green bogies her tiny body seemed able to produce, and the nurse had tutted and found a box of sky-blue tissues, and had blown Harmony's tiny, button nose.

They'd injected her with nanos a few months later, and she couldn't remember either the cold or the day her dad died, hit by the motorbike on the blind corner by the newsagent.

Everyone at school had nanos, except Anna, whose parents had some religious thing, or maybe some hippy healing crystal thing; no one was really sure and Anna didn't tell. Harmony's mum covered her standard immunisation package until she was twenty-one for barely £150 a year, and at the secondary school's recommendation she'd agreed to pay an extra £14.99 a month for an immunoboost that covered HPV, meningitis and whatever flu strain was doing the rounds that year. Harmony had always been good about keeping her nanos up to date, regularly checking the control panel on her phone for any updates to the tiny machines keeping her body in decent working order, and shutting down all streaming or internet browsing within the Wi-Fi zone during the period of an active transfer until installation was complete, as per recommended medical guidelines.

There were other upgrades, of course. A couple of kids at school boasted a few. Jenni, whose parents were notoriously pushy, was put on a dietary and neurological package throughout the entire A-level period at a cost of nearly £70 a week, someone once whispered, and sure, she did OK at exams, but Harmony wasn't

convinced that wasn't because she studied three hours a day extra during school term and twelve hours a day during revision time.

Clara, who was the only person in the year who seemed both good at and to enjoy sports, was on a muscle-enhancing package, but that wasn't enough to get her the football scholarship to her first university of choice, though she did make it on to the "Biomechanical Sport Therapy" course in Leeds, which made her perfectly happy.

Harmony had never looked at getting anything for herself. She hadn't had an infection since she was five, didn't know what earache was, couldn't understand the naturalists who insisted every year on getting hay fever "because nature knows best" or some such. The evidence was overwhelming, and healthcare companies like Fullife regularly ran ads to remind its current and potential clientele just what awaited them should they ever stop paying for their nanos.

This is gastroenteritis. The patient, as she vomits, is unable to prevent her bowels opening simultaneously. Her liquefied faeces carry the virus, which will infect anyone who comes to her assistance.

On the screen, a woman, face wracked with pain, leaned over the toilet, brilliant yellow-orange puke tumbling out of her mouth, thin white acid from her nose, while on the floor brown sludge seeped outwards, dribbling down between her thighs.

As the nodules grow on the eardrum, hearing begins to become muddy and impaired, with certain frequencies vanishing completely until finally she understands – too late – how far the infection has gone as yellow pus begins to seep into the hollow of her ear . . .

The day that Jarek blocked her on Facebook, Harmony opened up the nano control centre on her phone, and scrolled to in-app purchases.

The list of upgrades that Fullife offered seemed endless. Before, that had been off-putting, too much to think about.

**Ever wanted perfect skin?
Worried about pregnancy?
Thicker hair?**

White teeth!

Pancreatic support for those sugary treats . . .

Never worry about your waistline again!

The perfect boost for your marathon training . . .

She found what she was looking for under sexual health.

Take Control – your body, your choice. Never feel anxiety about unwanted pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases again. With Take Control, you can make your choices for your body and your lifestyle. This month with 10% discount on period control when you buy anything from the “My Body, My Choice” range – never menstruate on holiday again! In the event of vaginal bleeding or discharge from the nipples lasting for more than 3 days, please contact your healthcare provider.

The upgrade was £17.99 a month for the initial twelve-month contract, rising to £35 a month at the end of the introductory period, valid for new customers only. She sat down with a calculator. £17.99 was only four fewer drinks a month, and she didn't even like getting shit-faced anyway. She'd just have to be careful, balance these things up. It would be worth it.

This is Harmony Meads, aged nineteen, making a choice about her body, her life, not because of some bloke who was all into his upgrades, some jackass who just assumed everyone was like him and didn't need a condom – not that he'd bothered to invest in any upgrades for his testicles, she mused – but because at the end of the day, she wanted to be in control.

She hit “buy”.

That was the beginning.

Chapter 5

This is Harmony, twenty-eight years old.

The day after the first spot appeared on her chin, another appeared just above her right eye, and a slight bulge emerged around her hairline that promised future explosions.

She tried to get the day off work again, but Graham barked, “Harmony! We can’t cover your mistakes!”

With shaking hands, she lathered her face in pale pink foundation and wore her long hair loose to try and hide the growing, erupting pores around the side of her cheeks and jawline. A few guys in the office looked at her a little longer than was necessary just to acknowledge that she’d walked through the door, and she knew they knew, and knew they probably didn’t, or maybe didn’t care, and was certain they did, and that she’d ruined everything.

The afternoon appointments were a disaster. A family from Lebanon was looking for the perfect penthouse – knew they couldn’t afford to be by the river, but wanted to be no more than five minutes’ walk from the Thames. She took them to several properties which, on paper at least, were phenomenally stylish and within their price range, but the dad just kept on knocking on the walls and exclaiming, “It’s made of paper! Who did the internal layout? This is an inefficient use of space!”

Words – her usual, perfect, gushing words – faltered.

“The kitchen’s modern design actually maximises the efficiency of the . . . ” she tried, and then caught the mother looking at her sideways, and felt herself flicker with shame and fell silent.

“The historic warehouse conversion was once a brewhouse which overlooks the . . . ”

But Dad just huffed and grumbled that he would never have expected such weak plastering in such an expensive place.

No sale.

Three days later, she glanced at her hairbrush and realised there was a felted fistful of hair caught in the twines. Bending to examine her skull in the mirror, she saw a hollow patch of pink emerging at the crown of her scalp, which no amount of ingenious combing or spray could cover.

By now, her face was cracking under the weight of make-up, and when she went to work, the guys were obviously whispering about her.

She ignored the bills on her doormat, the emails marked with red flags and capital letters on her computer, and scrubbed her teeth until they hurt, which couldn't get rid of the slight yellow tinge spreading out from the tops of her gums.

Two weeks after the beginning of Anno Acne, as Jazzy, the only other woman on the floor dubbed it, Graham called her into the office. "Harmony," he grunted, feet up across his desk, long body rolled back, hands knitted over his six-pack as if he needed to remind himself of its firm presence beneath the blue shirt. "Let's talk about your current performance. How do you feel it's been going?"

When she got back to her flat, the landlady was waiting for her.

"It's not that I'm unsympathetic," she explained, "but I've got to do what I've got to do. Rent is rent, you know."

Harmony lay awake that night, as her armpits prickled with the strange, unfamiliar itch of wiry dark-brown hair beginning to grow, pushing up like hedgehog spikes through her flesh, and in the morning realised that the itching wasn't detergent left in her underwear, but vaginal thrush.

Chapter 6

“Well yes, as the nanos shut down you may experience some . . . How long have you had . . . Ah yes, well, after that long there will be an adjustment period as your body comes to terms with the loss of protective services from . . . No. There’s nothing to be done. Except pay. Are you able to make a payment now?”

“But I’ve been through shutdowns before. There was a hospital . . .”

“Yes, but you still had a lot of services running, didn’t you? Muscle, fat, digestion, skin, teeth, hair – my, there were a lot, and that’s not even counting the firewalled upgrades! Yes, well, I’m sorry to say, Ms Meads, that with so many upgrades now being withdrawn from your system, you will experience a transitional period, and please do make your payment soon as we don’t want you to go into punitive measures, do we?” A little laugh, a shared joke. “Oh my, that wouldn’t be good at all!”

A letter from a bailiff left under the door. We are authorised to take goods unless you pay. We are authorised to do this whether you let us in or not. If we have to smash down the door, you will pay for the damage. You must pay £60 immediately on receipt of this letter to cover our administration fee. This will not be deducted from the overall debt you owe – it is our administration fee for contacting you.

Upstairs, Phuong and Hailey screamed at each other through the paper floor: “Left, left, go left – there’s one high – shoot him, shoot him – *Jesus!*”

Downstairs, Mr Patel sung in the shower. “. . . *She taught me to yodel /*

Yodel-oh-ee-dee!”

“Cut that racket out!” roared Mrs Patel, voice twisted into a mechanical thing by its journey through the pipes. “Why are you

always making such a racket?”

This is Harmony Meads, eight weeks before her twenty-ninth birthday. Her carefully curated pink-peach blouses and tight-fit cream skirts are starting to bulge in all the wrong places around her gently expanding form. She tried going for a run yesterday and was tired before she left, and her whole body hurt within five minutes of a shuffle-gasp, heaving down breath, shooting pains running through her left ankle, her right calf, everything unbalanced, everything out of kilter.

Women in compression tights with patches of see-through webbing to help define the contours of their muscled legs don't even have to try to overtake her. Men in muscle-vests, a hint of bulging pec, a lot of heaving tricep, zoom past her with a rustle of wind. There was a time when she could do that, did that to stay in with the cool crowd, the upgraders and nano-modders who did just enough exercise on a weekend that there could still be a question mark over their perfect, honed bodies – was it nano or is it natural?

With nanos, running was easy.

Without, she can't imagine ever overcoming this pain, or the shame of being laughed at: pudgy girl trying to run.

She needs to buy new clothes, bigger clothes, and doesn't want to go to the shops, and doesn't have the money to get anything that would make her look good.

There is now a definite patch of blue-grey skin on the top of her scalp as her hair attempts to adjust to the failure of the nanos that have for . . . she's not sure how long . . . years . . . helped sustain that perfect silken growth, product-free. There are still parts of her face that don't have acne. A few patches on her cheeks, a small area between her eyebrows, but in the morning when she stands in front of the mirror, the skin on her chest and back is beginning to pucker and swell with tiny bumps of rupturing flesh. Her arms ache all the time as fat and fluid, contained for so long within a belt of muscle, begins at last to find freedom, sagging gently down, down, all of her going down.

She tells her friends that she's busy tonight. Busy, yeah, you know, got other commitments.

When her mum calls, which isn't very often, doesn't want to be a fusser, Harmony doesn't answer the phone.

The day before the landlady changed the locks on the door, Graham sat her down.

“So, Harmony. This office, it’s . . . well, it’s a very specific clientele we deal with, and our people, they’re the brand; they’re . . . There’s a wonderful opportunity just come up; I really think you’d be happier there. It’s the ideal place. You’d fit in perfectly and it’s not much of a cut in pay. The boys in Enfield are great. They’re really . . .”

“I don’t want to go to Enfield.” She refused to cry. Crying made her more ugly, and she’d known this conversation was coming, got her crying out of the way last night. She was strong. She had been through shit and she had survived. This would not break her. “I can turn this around. This is just a . . . I can turn this around. You know me. You know I can do it.”

“Harmony,” he explained, as gentle as she’d ever seen him, his expression as near to kindness as he could manage through his peaked, tweaked, primed facial upgrades, maybe the George Clooney or Captain America – it was hard to tell. “Let me be very clear. Either you go to Enfield, or you go home.”

She went to Enfield.

A new start, that was what she needed.

A new her.

Chapter 7

This is Harmony Meads, aged twenty-one.

Does she have upgrades? Or is she just young? Is that glow the first flush of excitement, life and hope that makes all people beautiful, a joy that no amount of nanotech can mimic?

(A mixture. She is excited for the future; she has dreams, ambitions; she has chosen the house she's going to buy when she's got the money; she has chosen, if not the man she'll marry, then certainly the car he'll drive, and the white cashmere jumper he'll wear on casual Sundays at garden parties. She also has upgraded her sexual protection, her resistance to fatigue – Do not use this program in conjunction with caffeine. If you experience heart palpitations please contact your healthcare provider urgently – and yes, her smile. She doesn't have to brush her teeth now, and even if No More Dentists doesn't seem to do much more than keep her teeth white and her breath minty-fresh, the idea that it's there makes her much more relaxed when expressing herself. She accepts that this may be a slightly costly placebo. She accepts that it's worth it.)

Harmony Meads went looking for a job.

Getting a job was harder than anyone had told her it would be. The year Harmony graduated with her hard-won 2:1, the housing bubble went, which also blew some other bubble which did something to inflation or something, which basically meant . . .

“When we hire someone as young as you, it's an investment. We are investing in the whole person.”

“Of course it's minimum youth wage until you're twenty-five, and then it's up to £8.50 an hour . . .”

“How do you feel about meat-derivative products?”

“What you need is to do internships! I know they're unpaid, but they're such a good opportunity for . . .”

She wore a shiny cream blouse and pencil skirt to interviews when

she got them, which wasn't often. She applied to temp agencies – just to fill the gap – but everyone else had applied too and she could only get shifts doing 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. sitting alone in the front of office buildings in Reading. No one came, no one called, the front door was locked and she had no idea why she was there in her vanilla pumps and brown eyeliner, pretending to herself that she'd study and mostly just doing Sudoku, too tired for anything else.

Even that work dried up after a while, and no one told her why, or if it was something she did.

In the end, she got a job in a stationery shop back in Bracknell. It paid by the hour, and didn't cover health insurance. She moved back in with her mum, and when her student card expired and healthcare costs doubled, Mum came to her and said:

"So . . . I know I've always paid for this, very happily of course, always want the best for you, but I was wondering if . . . well, how you're doing financially? I'm very happy to cover it, don't you worry, I can cope – but what do *you* want?"

Karen Meads, sixty-four years old, widow at forty-seven, had worked down the local supermarket for seventeen years until her back started to give out. Then she had lived off savings, and a bit of income from the government and her dead husband's insurance policy, and in term-time had rented out Harmony's room to actors doing panto down the local theatre, and coped. She always coped. It was what she did.

"What do *you* want?" she asked, standing in the kitchen door in the bright pink onesie in which she went on power walks with the over-sixties group, her only concession to luxury the diamond wedding ring she'd worn since the day they'd said their vows, and which she'd wear until the day she died and joined her man in heaven. Harmony's dad had spent most of his savings on this ring, Karen whispered, and when she found out she'd been so angry at the stupid man. But even now, scrimping by, coping, she'd never been tempted to sell it. Not once. Not ever.

Gently curling hair the colour of imminent autumn rain, the same green eyes as her daughter, Karen was beginning to shrink, but not to stoop. At night she slept in a hairnet, and before she pissed in the morning she put on mascara and checked her hormone levels and blood pressure on the computer. She didn't like syncing her nanos to her mobile phone; what if someone pinched it while she was out? What then?

“You know I’m very happy for you to be here,” added Karen as Harmony paused to digest the layers within her question. “It’s so nice having the time with you; you’re always welcome. It’s nice for a mother to help out.”

“I can pay for it, Mum,” Harmony sighed. “I’ll be fine.”

Harmony Meads was also a coper.

When her sexual health package came up for renewal, Harmony thought for a long time about going back to the basics. If she paid for only the minimum of immunities – colds, flus, the nasty stuff like pneumonia and measles – and saved carefully, she could look at renting her own place away from the endless semi-detached backstreets of Bracknell, away from the yellow-brick houses and white porches, trimmed hedges and winding flagstone alleys where direction lost all meaning.

If she rented, of course, she’d never have the money for a deposit on a place of her own, so in the end, she chose to keep the full package, including Take Control, and stay with her mum. Besides, she liked having a say over when her periods happened, if they happened, and being able to disable the worst of the cramps.

“I can pay some rent, Mum!” she exclaimed in the high voice of the truly hopeful, truly pained, and curled inside with relief when Karen replied:

“Oh no, of course not, I won’t hear of it! I mean, we’re not living like queens are we, dear, but we’re fine, and it’s very nice having someone else in the house. Now, what would you like when you come back for supper? Macaroni cheese or carbonara?”

Her mum was a feeder, and to make matters worse, a good cook, as long as what she cooked involved pasta or cheese.

Slowly, a little squelchy fold of flesh at a time, Harmony began to put on weight. She realised it was happening, would raise her knees to her chin and see flesh rippled across her belly, pinch at her sides and bum in disgust. She joined a local jogging group but was horrified to discover it was also mostly women over the age of sixty, some of whom had more stamina than she did. She quit, and went to the local leisure centre instead, but it was hard, after ten hours at work, to get home, change clothes and go out again for her £7.50 spin class on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and even though her mum bought her three months’ membership for Christmas, she was often too tired to do much, in mind if not in body, and nothing seemed to

make much of a difference anyway.

She kept applying for jobs, but less now. Applying was tiring, hard, and more than half never even bothered to get back to her. Sometimes she got an interview, but that never seemed to go anywhere, and twelve months passed, and nothing changed.

Chapter 8

It took Shelly getting the promotion to the big stationery shop in Virginia Water to change Harmony's life.

They both went for it, even though it wasn't much of a step up. There would be more flexibility in hours, a slight pay rise and besides, everyone knew that the Virginia Water store stocked more deluxe stationery products – leather-bound notebooks and artist's drawing sets for the discerning client – and was the place to be.

Shelly had worked at the shop for seven months and was, at the kindest, useless.

"I just, you know, like, don't really care about this stuff," she explained to Harmony as they tagged reams of A4 paper. "I'm, like, only doing it until my modelling career can, you know."

Shelly was irrefutably beautiful. Her brilliant autumn-blond hair flowed and curled around her face like frozen candlelight; her skin glowed like tungsten; and though she was stuck wearing the staff T-shirt, her short shorts revealed legs and buttocks hewn from Michelangelo's marble. Her beauty was such that all the boys assumed she was a tart, that there was no other reason to be that sensational save for the benefit of men, but she replied stiffly that she was saving herself, and that this was all cos of who she wanted to be, and to fuck right off or my dad will fucking do you, get me?

"Why do you want the job in Virginia Water?" asked Harmony. "I mean, if you're going to be a model . . ."

"Oh. I dunno. It's just, you know . . . like, you gotta . . . you know!"

It was of course possible that in the job interview Shelly rose to the occasion with a prepared speech about her love of ballpoint pens, or how she really appreciated the difference between 2B or 4B pencils, but it didn't seem likely. They organised a farewell party for her, and Shelly cried and said she'd be back to see them all soon, as if Virginia Water was more than fifteen minutes away by

train or she didn't still live in Wokingham with her bloke and his sister and her husband, and Harmony sat at the back and realised that she was never going to do anything with her life, and was stuck in fucking Bracknell, and it was all fucking pointless.

"Sweetie, don't worry about it," whispered Karima, fifty-eight years old, a chubby, curly-haired matron with skin the colour of city sunset, who'd started working at the shop after her shit of a husband jilted her thirty-three years into the marriage, leaving a mortgage and a labradoodle called Peaky. "You've got so much more than that little Shelly has! You've got brains; you've got real commitment, a real soul. All she's got is nanos and upgrades, and everyone's got those these days. She's pretty enough, but with her looks she needs to be beautiful *and* natural if she's going to get into the papers, and she doesn't have enough to pull off a naturalist, or enough sense to spend smart on her upgrades. And besides, you can't program for personality, can you?"

These words, intended to comfort, fell numb on Harmony's soul. For a little while.

Getting her first credit card was astonishingly easy.

A couple of pay slips, and that was it.

Her overdraft was £2000.

She only got it because the first three months of Powerful Poise had to be paid upfront, and she didn't have the cash to hand. She knew that, with a bit of careful judgement, she could easily keep up on minimum card payments, even with the APR being so high. The trick was not to let it get out of control.

She chose her first sports enhancement package from the thousands of contenders, very carefully and after a great deal of research.

Combining flexibility with strength, grace with control, Powerful Poise is the package for any aspiring dancer or yogi. Muscular definition combined with feminine sensuality, show the world your inner strength! Powerful Poise cannot alter muscle development beyond the constraints of current skeletal structure. If you experience jaundice or liver failure, please contact your healthcare provider.

The decision was not unlike buying new, expensive clothes. She read articles, checked comparative websites, went on forums to ask

other women how they felt about their packages. Yes, Goddess of War might give you fantastic muscles, but did it not perhaps make you seem a little masculine? How about Spin Cycle – the perfect complementary nano upgrade for the dedicated gym-goer? Yes, it gave you a far more robust cardiac boost than Powerful Poise for roughly the same price, but for all it might be more therapeutic long-term, it also led to extremely muscular thighs and calves, which Harmony didn't feel sent the right signals.

And she knew what the signals were. She waited four weeks as the nanos worked, and this time, knowing they were doing their thing, she also exercised, adding her own efforts to the money – the sizable money – she had invested, and felt, for the first time in months, great. There were actors and actresses, models and singers who ostensibly went for the naturalists' approach, who were genetically beautiful from birth and didn't need to worry about what they ate – if you believed the magazines. Harmony didn't, but even if it was true, she knew that the natural look could never send such a message, such a decisive message about *choice*, about *choosing* an identity, as a few carefully judged upgrades could.

"Have you done something to your hair?" asked Karen one evening as she returned from gym, smell of sweat and pride mingling across her skin.

She knew what the real question was and felt the judgement beneath it. Even when her back had started hurting, Karen had forked out for the bare minimum of upgrades, a spinal package that dented the pain without ever letting her imagine it wasn't real, that she wasn't getting old. She wasn't a naturalist, but then again: "You have to learn to cope, don't you? Otherwise you're just living in cloud-cuckoo-land!"

"No, Mum," she snapped, and saw her mum draw herself up a little straighter in response to the lash in her voice. "I'm just looking after myself right."

When she was at 51kg of perfect, honed muscle – nothing too flashy, but defined enough to declare that here was a woman who valued her body, herself, comfortable in her skin and her identity – Harmony started applying for jobs again, including full body pictures of herself in a smart, sleeveless, figure-hugging dress suit, revealing the tone in her arms and strength in her shoulders.

The interviews started coming in almost immediately.

"Of course, with your sales experience you understand that . . . "

“Our employees embody our brand.”

“Really respect your positive attitude.”

She took the job at the estate agent in Epsom for its go-get-'em vibe, its promise of excellent returns, and superb health insurance package.

Chapter 9

Twenty-nine years old, Harmony Meads finally hit 82kg three months after the move to the Enfield estate agents. She weighed herself in the morning; she weighed herself in the afternoon. She shifted her weight forward; she shifted her weight back. Nothing could change the relentless conclusion of the bathroom scales. Nothing could keep her from the truth that she was fat.

One week later, her debt to Fullife for unpaid medical services hit £1000, and to encourage swift repayment while still supporting essential medical services, they cut off her sense of smell.

These are the smells that Harmony Meads cannot experience as she roams through London with her head turned down towards the grey, glistening pavement.

Fish and chips. Greasy chicken at 3 a.m. as your stomach rumbles. Boiling pasta in the pan when you come home from work. Blue cheese on a wooden plate; cheddar cheese in the sandwich as you peel back the foil. Too much chilli in the soup, an assault that burns on the way in, burns on the way out. Hot lamb shredded by the man on the market stall, meat and heat, curry powder, mango chutney, coriander and cumin, fresh coffee at 8 a.m., tea at 1 p.m., that first whiff of wine when the cork comes off, tomato soup when you feel low, roses in bloom, lavender, a friend's perfume, a stranger's scent as they lean in close.

The gas, when you forget you've left it on in the kitchen.

Toast, as it burns.

Microwave meals turning to stone.

Carbonised smoke pouring out of the oven.

Mould in the bathroom.

Mint toothpaste.

Your own skin, freshly washed in lemon gel, just a slime you rub between your fingers, meaningless and ugly without its scent.

Sheets, unchanged on the bed.

The state of your own toilet.

The cat shit you step in as you come home, treading it all over
the carpet.

The weather before it changes.

The smell after rain, when all things come back to life.

Chapter 10

“You are in a queue. Your call is important to us . . . ”

“Hi, my nanos are . . . I can’t smell anything.”

“Ms Meads, as I believe has been explained to you, your current owing balance is now in excess of £800 and there is a penalty of £300 for late payment to Fullife and under these circumstances we are authorised to shut down non-essential systems for . . . ”

“Can’t you just shut it all down? Just . . . turn off the nanos. Turn them off.”

“We are still in contract unless you pay the termination fee. Our contract obligates us to ensure that your primary systems are in excellent working order! If you can’t work, how will you ever manage to sort this sort of thing out? Did you know that influenza killed more people in 1919 than died in all of World War One?”

“Mummy, why is the lady ugly?” whispered the child as Harmony motioned the family round their private tour of this charming semi-detached three-bedroom property with two bathrooms, one en suite, on the side of the North Circular.

The house shuddered and shook as the lorries roared by, the windows faintly misted over with exhaust, the once-white tiles in the kitchen stained a yellow-brown from the years of relentless smoking by the previous occupant, who’d finally cracked and was selling it all to go and live on a canal boat in Tring.

“Shush! She’s not . . . Don’t say things like that!” whispered the mother, glancing askance at Harmony to see if she’d noticed.

Harmony Meads, the flesh sagging beneath her chin, not yet sure how to wear the almost perfectly taut ball of her belly, hair done up in a bun as if a conflagration of pins might disguise the shedding of her locks, stares vacantly at nothing much, having perhaps seen it all before.

“Well, thank you, yes, very interesting,” muttered the dad as

they squeezed back into her tiny estate agent's car, a postage stamp on wheels, knees to chin, Harmony's chair pushed all the way back from the pedals so only the child can fit.

"Mum, she's *weird*," whispered the child, and Harmony stared at the road and made no sound until the dad awkwardly asked if they could put the radio on. The child was seven years old – old enough to be running a basic nanos package and maybe a few upgrades of her own too so that she might grow up big, strong, smart and beautiful.

After, at the estate agents, as dad and child were heading away, the mum hesitated, then turned and scurried back.

"My daughter is . . . She's very . . . I mean to say that she doesn't understand the choices people make, you see?"

Harmony stared, blank and cold, into the woman's eyes, and the woman looked away, nodded once, licking her lips, and scurried after her family.

That night, drunk on cheap beer, she finally called Karen.

"Mum? I'm . . . I'm in trouble."

There is a great darkness that sometimes she dreams of, that she is falling into. Sometimes when she dreams, she hears herself say these words – "Help me" – and wakes up terrified, not knowing what is real. "I'm in . . . I've got these bills I'm in . . . It's credit cards too. It's credit cards and I'm behind on everything. Just – I'm in real trouble."

Karen Meads never let anything perturb her. The most extreme her emotional state ever reached was, "Oh dear. That doesn't sound good."

This phrase was deployed now, and Harmony nearly choked with relief to hear it. In the language of anyone else, it was a nothing sound, a nowhere noise made in the hope that things will change and the moment will pass. From Karen Meads, it was the rallying cry, the charge to war, and patiently she listened as it all came out – the credit cards, the bills, the unpaid debts, the shutting down of her nanos, the acne, the weight, the baldness, the explosion of hair beneath her armpits, the hay fever, the colds, the .

. .

"Can they do this to you, dear?" asked Karen, soft voice rising a little in pitch, the nearest she came to shouting. "Can they do this?"

"The health company say that they have a moral and contractual

duty to ensure my immunisation packages are functional, but non-essential services can be disabled.”

“This doesn’t sound like disabling.”

“They said that after so long on the nanos my body would be . . . It wouldn’t know how to cope, that once you’ve been on nanos for this long it’s . . . There’s a thing called ‘punitive financial reclamation’ and I’ve been trying to pay the money but there’s also the gas and electric and food and travel and rent and . . .”

“Darling, I’m coming to visit you.”

A nuclear option. An explosion of Karen. She came up by the train to Waterloo, and then had to borrow someone else’s phone at the station because she’d forgotten to charge hers, but had written Harmony’s number down in her notebook so that was all right, and didn’t understand what the difference was between the Bakerloo and Jubilee lines but somehow made it to High Barnet with a cry of “London is a ghastly city, isn’t it?”

They sat down in Harmony’s rented room, and for the first time went through the figures. Not the figures on which Harmony’s life had been running – not her weekly salary in, weekly money out – but the real figures. The ones that lay beneath, the ones that lasted longer than Monday to Friday and were going to gobble her life whole.

The £7000 or so she owed across four credit cards to four separate banks had, since she first took them out, ballooned. Sometimes she made the minimum repayment, sometimes she missed it and over barely three years her initial debt had crawled up to a little over £11,000.

“Can’t you just . . . live a little more carefully?” blurted Karen, and immediately knew she’d said something stupid, and saw only pain in her daughter’s eyes. She started fiddling with her wedding ring, oblivious to the motion, the flesh grown under and up and around the metal, and if anything spoke of a heart rushing in fear and dread, it was that little clawing at a diamond on a golden band.

In the end, they came up with a financial rescue plan, cutting every cost to a minimum, and injecting an emergency £200 from Karen’s secret box of cash that she kept in an old make-up box above the bed, to try and tide her through the worst of the moment.

At the end of every week, the plan left Harmony with £7.50 spare for any indulgences – “Fancy food, maybe?” suggested Karen hopefully. “Or nice soap?”

For three weeks she made it, and though her debts did not decrease, neither did they grow. On the fourth, the office went out for drinks to celebrate Steve's birthday, and she didn't want to lie, didn't want to tell them why she couldn't go, the horrid, bitter truth of it all, so she went and had to buy a round. It was just what was expected, and it would have ruined everyone's night if she'd said no and explained why.

And that was the next five weeks shot, and she didn't have anything spare and then the heel broke off her shoe and she still didn't fit her clothes and needed something to wear, anything . . .

"Is everything, you know, all right?" asked Ibrahim, the boss of the Enfield office. "Are you . . . you know?"

Once upon a time, she would have looked on Ibrahim with scorn. Twenty-three years in fucking Enfield, twenty-three years of semi-detached-with-a-lovely-shed-round-back, twenty-three years of nothing but immune boosts and the odd nutritional upgrade, not even bothering to get his wrinkles done, "quirky" Ibrahim, selling houses with eccentricity and his famous boiler anecdotes. For a while, she'd hated him, and now he was sat opposite her in his office, a shrine to Tottenham Hotspur, legs crossed, hands resting on his knees, and he was being kind.

She found the kindness harder than scorn. Scorn she could take, weave into a coat of armour around herself, a wall of anger, hostility and pain. Scorn was hot and bright, a fearsome thing. Kindness destroyed what little strength she had left, and at last, she told him everything.

Chapter 11

This is Harmony Meads, aged twenty-six.

She is beautiful.

She clearly has upgrades, because in the conventional sense of the thing her eyes are a little far apart and there's nothing remarkable or honed about her face, and she is not really beautiful.

But she is so, so beautiful. She has made choices – she has *chosen* to get upgrades, to celebrate who she is, to rejoice in what her body is and how she lives in it, to delight in being Harmony Meads.

Despite working twelve hours a day, sometimes six days a week, every part of her is honed, toned to muscular grace. Never too far, never the warped, lumpen thing of true muscular fiends, but a feminine strength, a ballerina's power, focused and enhanced with a few choice additional accessories and subtle biological tweaks such as Bright Eyes – If you start bleeding from the eyes please contact your healthcare provider – and Voice of an Angel – 96% agree that this is the perfect voice for the perfect woman! Taken from a sample of 271 respondents. For best results, don't drink any substances colder than 12°C.

Her career has been remarkable. The estate agents in Epsom barely managed to hold on to her for eleven months before she was poached by a branch in Croydon. Croydon couldn't keep her before Bermondsey grabbed her, shuffling her on to the River Thames with a cry of "Talent like that shouldn't be wasted!"

Kensington and Chelsea made bigger sales more reliably, but Bermondsey was where the youth were, the fashionable, the beautiful ones, speaking a language of technology and modern finishes, while the West Londoners were still set in their Victorian railings and quiet gardens with lovely rosebushes.

Harmony Meads is beautiful, successful and fits in perfectly. Everyone in the Bermondsey office was upgraded in one way or another. Even Jazzy, a little older, a little wiser, sexy and more ballsy than any of the men, who could have got away with being a

naturalist if she'd worked at it, had gone down the upgrade road.

"I could go authentic," she mused, slipping her long, black hair back into a ponytail and pushing her round, scarlet lips towards the mirror in the lady's loo. "But there's just not enough hours in the day to really make it work. I have chosen a certain lifestyle, and I like my life, and I'm damned if I'm going to sacrifice it for the effort needed to really commit to the naturalist's look."

Harmony, hiding her awe behind the gentle daubing of a cotton pad to her flawless, poreless cheeks, nodded agreement. Only a few models and actresses could pull off the naturalist's look these days, and even then most fashion magazines tended to agree that while it was all very impressive and that, it wasn't the choice of the true superstar. The trend-setting idols were the ones who were getting custom nanos programmed directly by the health product designers; from the rock stars with the shimmer of scaled snakeskin translucence on their skin, through to the eagle-eyed, black-tongued bad boys of the studios, programmed to shock, surprise or just to have the perfect build for their next explosive blockbuster.

Such things were, Jazzy felt, a little vulgar, but that didn't stop the boys – and two girls – of the office getting pissed together on a Friday night and holding forth on what they were going to next do to their bodies, what they loved, what they despised.

Everyone had some form of sexual upgrade, and unlike most men she'd met, the boys in the office were willing to talk about theirs, unashamed to blurt, "God, to think what my penis *used* to be!" It became a matter of vital scientific necessity to work out which upgrade was best by a series of drunken tests ranging from the standard examination of sexual organs down the pub through to wild and preferably recorded (for science) sexual acts.

"We should all shag Harmony!" roared Al, who paid £39.99 a month for his perfect stubble and a further £82.99 for his Urban Prince package – The panther stalking its prey, the tiger in the shadow – the apex predator has always had the scent of power, blood and victory. Embrace the wildness inside with our latest pheromone enhancement technology, now 2-for-1 with anything from our "Sensational Allure" range. Offer must end Friday.

"No but yeah but listen to me, if we all shag Harmony, yeah, and then she scores us on a rating of one to ten – or if we have like, a questionnaire, because it isn't all about size . . . "

A roar of laughter from the crowd, and Harmony laughed too in

between shrill objections, because that was what was required, because it was funny, because this was her life and these were her friends. “. . . No but yeah, seriously, like, sexual prowess isn't just about how big it is, yeah, so we should come up with these questions and then, like, blindfold her maybe, so it's really scientific . . . ”

“I'm not shagging you. I'm definitely not shagging *you* . . . ”

“God, you're so stiff, Harmony. You're such a prude . . . ”

“You're just not worth it, luv,” she replied merrily, though as luck would have it she did end up shagging Marco that evening, and it was great, and he was really awkward about it the next morning and neither of them spoke about it after.

The first time she tried cocaine, it didn't have any effect on her.

None.

Zilch.

She couldn't understand, and when she got home, there was an alert in her nano control panel.

You have been exposed to an illegal and dangerous toxin. It has been neutralised free of charge as part of your renal package. You may create an optional exception AT YOUR OWN RISK for an additional £14.99 a month via your control panel.

After thinking it through, and doing a little research online, she didn't pay for a toxin exemption. Instead she went back to the parties and took the cocaine, and revelled at how she was still in control, part of this world and ruling it, rocking it. And one night she found herself dancing with the boys and Jazzy, and she smelled Jazzy's sweat, felt the heat of her body, the brush of thigh against thigh and, without knowing why, found herself pushing against the other woman's flesh, belly to belly, groin to groin, writhing, snaking across Jazzy's body, pushing her lips into her neck, against her lips, fingers around her backside until with a roaring laugh and a “Piss off, Harmony!” Jazzy shoved her away and buckled over with laughter, and the others laughed too and Harmony wasn't sure what had happened, but laughed because it was that or be an idiot, the only one not in on the joke, and scurried to the bar and ordered vodka, which the nanos processed into a warm tingling in her forehead and belly that was nothing nearly enough like being drunk.

At the office, Jazzy said nothing, and smirked at Harmony from the corner of her mouth, and the boys chuckled at a private joke, and when Harmony got home that evening she tore through the online store, ripping through data until at 3.40 a.m. she found the upgrade.

Elevation – the ultimate pack for the sexual woman. Enhance your libido, bring your hormones into perfect balance and unleash the real woman inside! Use at your own risk.

It was the most expensive upgrade she'd ever bought.

She thought a long time before buying, but her overdraft had been automatically extended by the credit card company, and she knew it was the right thing to do the moment the payment went through.

Chapter 12

When she met Jiannis, she could immediately identify and cost the programs running in his body, and liked the choices he'd made. Too many men went for the boxer's build, but he'd chosen a marathon-runner's physique, with the toned arms of a tennis player and a dash of enhancement to his genitals that made him a magnificent lover without entering into the realm of the ridiculous as too many men were often tempted to do.

Jiannis worked in finance, did something with data, and she met him while selling him the luxury character-filled new-build apartment on Blackfriars Bridge complete with private off-road parking, twenty-four-hour concierge, private gym and film club. He made an offer immediately, on the condition she had a drink with him, and they christened the deal with their bodies at the secondary inspection once offer was accepted, then again on the confirmation of purchase and, of course, on the day keys changed hands.

She knew he was the one for her when they did a line of coke together down the club off Cannon Street, and she realised that he too was doing it just for show, just to be with the lads, and had left his anti-toxin protocols active, just like her. He liked to be in control. He liked to control his job, his body, his world. Nothing he did was unconsidered, even when it seemed wild, delightful, spontaneous. He understood the value of appearance, and knew how to appear relaxed when tense, at ease when on guard. She admired him instinctively, and liked that he admired her too, and when he asked her to move in with him when her lease came up for renewal, she decided it was probable she'd end up loving him.

"He seems like a very . . . respectable . . . young man," was Karen's assessment the day they had lunch together in Richmond, a halfway point between her life and her mum's, straight up the railway from Bracknell. "He seems . . . yes, well, I hope he does right by you."

If Karen had called him a scion of the Hun, a reprobate and a dangerous fool, she would not have done so in stronger language, and Harmony knew this, and chose just this once to hear the words spoken rather than their meaning, and smiled her perfect smile, a smile to illuminate the world, and said, “Really glad you like him, Mum.”

Six months of bliss followed.

She knew they were blissful, because she had decided that they almost certainly would be, and though she was a sensible woman, a woman who knew how to respect herself, there was no denying that Jiannis was one of the smartest, sexiest, most on-it people she’d ever met. If being with him meant that she was also all of these things, then she’d take it. She would rejoice in this identity.

He chose the best restaurants, and even though the bill was sometimes a bit . . . but it was OK, because her credit card kept on extending the overdraft and she was still making minimum payments, and besides, he’d take her out a lot anyway, pay for her drinks down the club, though she’d always insist she was her own woman and could pay for herself.

He had interesting, intelligent friends too. Not the swaggering, show-offs of the estate agents, not men (and women) whose whole careers were built around the bluster and the sell, but cultivated, clever friends who’d chosen their upgrades with real discernment, and exercised, just for that added bit of self-control, to prove that they were capable of it. Every Saturday, their photos would go up on social media, proud athletes conquering new challenges, even if the nanos did most of the work.

Jiannis knew vegans, whose nanos were programmed to fill in the protein deficiencies of their diets; he knew teetotallers who’d paid – she had no idea how much; she couldn’t find the upgrade online anywhere – for an at-will upgrade to stimulate an endorphin and dopamine rush that was, they swore, better than LSD, but which they only used on Sundays or between the hours of 11 and 12 p.m. on Friday nights, because they didn’t *need* this shit to feel good. They didn’t *need* any of it. They made choices. And their choices made them magnificent.

She sat down with Jiannis to compare nanos the day she moved in with him. He laughed at some of her upgrades, tutted at others – mostly at things she didn’t have – applauded her taste in many of her physical enhancements.

“Elevation,” he chuckled. “I knew there was something about you. Christ, when I’m near you it’s just . . . Jesus.”

For a moment, she wondered if he’d ask her to turn it off, and wasn’t sure she would. What was sex like, when your body wasn’t rushing with hormones, when your skin didn’t transmit a come-hither, all-pervasive allure, when there were just parts pressing against other parts, biology happening, instead of something extraordinary, profoundly beautiful, like it was in the movies? She wasn’t sure she could remember, but somewhere at the back of her mind the face of Jarek the third-year student floated, astonished, indignant.

“*Don’t you have upgrades?*” he’d whispered, and she closed her eyes to try and drown his face in the dark, and opened them again to see Jiannis, all man, all himself, reaching out to stroke her chin, enamoured of her beauty, her wonder, herself.

“You are beautiful,” he murmured. “You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.”

Chapter 13

Her mum had her first stroke three months after Harmony moved in with Jiannis.

It could have been worse, the doctors said. Her nanos automatically detected the biological malfunction and rushed to the site of the clot to dissolve it before the damage could spread too far. Even though she didn't have anything specifically programmed for the job, her mum's insurance had an emergency medicine clause in it which could detect major events. She had to pay an extra £400 on her end-of-month bill for the unexpected activation, and didn't walk quite right afterwards, leaning sometimes on a walking stick and finding her left leg sluggish to respond.

"It's a bargain!" she announced, when the bill came through. "You don't remember, but I do – before the nanos, strokes were a big deal!"

Jiannis came with Harmony to visit her mum in the hospital in Reading, where the medical programmers and nano consultants bickered about protocols and code, and whether to try an experimental program on Mr O'Rourke in bed six, or how to convince Mrs Ng in bed four that she needed to upgrade her liver function.

Harmony wasn't even especially anxious until she got to the hospital. Strokes happened sometimes – even the best programming couldn't predict for everything, and huge leaps had been made in stemming the worst effects of age, especially if you were willing to pay for the extra packages.

Seeing Karen in bed, surgical socks pulled up around her pillowy blue-veined calves, indignant spotted grey robe loosely done up around her bare, sagging buttocks, caused a momentary flash of worry, but it was almost immediately dispelled by Karen hollering, "Cooey! Coo-ey!" across the snoozing late afternoon ward as if her daughter might miss her over the twenty yards that separated door

from booth. Embarrassment flared in Harmony's skin, barely suppressed by Control My Blush – never be betrayed by your skin again, recommended by pro-poker players and leading TV celebrities! If swelling persists for more than four days after activation, contact your healthcare provider.

But Jiannis was there, squeezing her hand, smiling patiently. "Your mother is a character," he said. "You manage her very well."

"Cooley, cooley! Oh, you've brought Jiannis too. How nice. How lovely to see you."

"How are you, Mrs Meads?" Jiannis, white shirt, white teeth, white trousers, unfolding into a padded beige armchair next to the bed, a knight in shining armour come to visit the stricken queen.

"Oh, you know, I cope, don't I?"

They stayed for forty minutes, as Karen blathered on about power walking this and local old age group that and the thing that Mrs Frith said at number twenty-six and how you couldn't trust people these days and the local bus service and the new development by the council offices and . . .

"Going so soon? Well, quite right, I mean you've got to live your life, haven't you? I'll be out of here soon; they're just keeping me in for observations. Toodle-oo!"

Harmony struggled to meet her mother's eye, to look back as she headed for the door, smiling at nothing, Jiannis's hand on her arm. A doctor scurried up to her as she headed for the exit, scuttling round from behind a desk where an ancient computer grunted and groaned with the effort of data. "Ms Meads? Ms Meads, I'm Dr Dalal, I'm—Excuse me!"

Harmony only stopped walking because Jiannis did, squeezing her arm hard enough to hurt. She spun round, smile already fixed, as a diminutive woman with skin the colour of chai and scraggy dark hair held up with a mass of pins and clips scampered up to her. "Ms Meads, thank you, yes, you are Mrs Meads' next of kin, yes, you are . . . Can I have a word?"

"I'll wait by the car," murmured Jiannis as Dr Dalal scurried Harmony into a small room with coffee machine, old magazines and a bowl of plastic flowers.

"Has anyone explained the situation to you?" Dr Dalal spoke with one hand resting over the pager at her hip, like a gunslinger ready to shoot into action, shifting her weight constantly from one foot to another, seemingly oblivious to her constant motion.

“Mum seems fine. The nanos got the clot.”

“Yes . . . yes, they did. But the question is, what caused the clot? Ms Meads, you need to know that this was possibly just a warning shot. We’re doing a few more tests to see if there are any obvious causes, but I would be surprised if this is the only stroke your mother experiences. Does she have K-blast or Zenblood?”

“Uh . . . no. Don’t think so.”

“I would really recommend that she gets them. I’m going to be prescribing them for her during her stay, but she really needs to be on them long-term. I’ll write them down; you can contact the insurance company when she’s released.” A scrawl of paper, words barely intelligible, shoved briskly into Harmony’s hand. “All better! Good, good!” sung Dr Dalal merrily, and she scampered away without another word.

Karen was released home three days later.

“Stairs are still a little tricky,” she mused, “And things don’t taste quite right, but I’m coping. Don’t you worry about me!”

“Mum, do you have K-blast or Zenblood?”

“Never heard of them.”

“You were on them while connected to the hospital’s Wi-Fi.”

“Oh really? What do they do?”

“They’re supposed to help you not get strokes.”

“Well then, I’d better get them, hadn’t I?”

“Yeah. I think that’d be a really good idea.”

“Can you do it for me? You know I’m not very good with this app thingy. It’s all just renal function this and optional upgrade that. Doesn’t make any sense to me.”

“Sure. I’ll check it out.”

She forgot about it, of course, for a few days. Work was busy, busy, busy: some really big sales going through, some fantastic properties coming on to the market, and there was always Jiannis and his friends. He was proud of her, really proud; wanted her to be at everything, meet everyone.

She only remembered on Sunday morning while he was cooking black pudding breakfast. Jiannis cooked huge breakfasts, feasts of taste, of sensory delight, and of course never put on any weight, shitting most of it out unchanged within a few hours, his nutritional upgrades having extracted what they needed as the mass of

avocado, bacon, syrup, pancake, fried egg, tomato, mushroom, sausage, bean and prosecco moved through his digestive tract.

The sight of black pudding sizzling in the pan, the sudden smell of hot, dry blood, hit her nose with a start of sensory delight and immediate guilt.

“Shit,” she hissed, grabbing her phone and logging into her mum’s app account. Karen wasn’t ever any good at remembering passwords, and Harmony’s resentment at being used as an IT consultant for so many years had dwindled into resigned calm as she realised it was just easier – simply easier – to do it herself.

She found K-blast and Zenblood within a few moments.

Blood thinning doesn’t have to be frightening. With our new fibrin protocols, any injuries will clot within 15 minutes regardless of thinning protocols, while the risk of thrombosis is cut to barely 2% with our latest 3.1 update.

The combined cost for both was £270 a month.

“Fuck.”

“Babe?” Jiannis, bare chest, hairless, tight jeans compressed around a perfect backside, glanced round from his sizzling, one eyebrow arched.

“Mum’s upgrades. They’re pricey.”

“How much?”

“More than I think she can afford.”

“Does she need them?”

“They’re supposed to help prevent strokes.”

“You’d better get them for her, then.”

“Me?”

“Well, she’s your mother.”

Hot fat bouncing in the pan, a sudden rush of noise and juice as he threw the sausages in.

Harmony scrolled down through the app, reading. Maybe just K-blast, or just Zenblood?

The ad auto-played after she’d been inactive for more than twenty seconds.

Immobilised by the stroke, she lies, paralysed from the shoulders down, unable to control her bladder function. It’s hard to tell if the tears she cries are from nerve damage, or fear. The risk of a deep vein thrombosis climbs every day, until

finally a new clot breaks away and rushes straight to her heart. As shooting pains rush through the left side of her frozen, unresponsive body, she begins to gasp for breath, panting for oxygen that her heart can no longer . . .

Harmony fumbled for her credit card and didn't hesitate as she put in her details.

Sometimes it was easier to deal with her mum by remote control, after all.

Chapter 14

It was at the Burns Night feast that it all began to change.

The feast was organised by Jeremy, who was half-Scottish and had lived in Glasgow until he was seven. He didn't sound Scottish, and lived in a four-bedroom down in Gerrard's Cross, but what was the point of even a glimmer of heritage, he'd say, if you couldn't have a massive piss-up once a year?

"Fair fa yoooouuurr honest, sonssiiiiiee fassse!" intoned Graham, four whiskies in as he wobbled precariously on top of the table, while the room howled and swayed around him, windows slithered with condensation, floor sticky with dry beer. *"Great CHIEftaaannn o'de puddin' rassssee!"*

Had any argument ever been more convincingly put forward for Scottish independence than Graham's accent, Harmony wondered?

"Aboooooooooonnn them a'ye tak your PLASE!"

Jiannis squeezed her backside and pressed up tight as the crowd surged and cheered towards the kitchen door at the climax of Graham's inexorable verse. With a roar of drunken delight and a shattering of glass tumbling from inebriated hands, the haggis was brought forth, a bulging, swelling sheen of translucent tissue stuffed to the gills with onion, suet, shredded heart, liver and lung, raised up high on a silver plate. The plate was spun, spun high round the room, as hands reached and clawed up for the aloof dish, before the man carrying it lost his footing and with a rupture of hot fat and crimson cooked organ it tumbled to the floor, splitting across high-heeled foot and pressed linen trouser to a howl of approval from the crowd.

"HAGGIS FIGHT!" screamed a man, and from the kitchen more dishes emerged, smaller, fist-sized haggis on more silver plates, and immediately a woman grabbed one and flung it into the face of her neighbour like a custard pie, hooting with merriment as stomach ruptured and hot meat splattered across her chin and into her hair.

“HAGGIS FIGHT!” cheered Jiannis, and again the crowd lunged forward, slipping on spilled drink and meat, grabbing their weapons to hurl at friend and neighbour. Harmony was swept up with the crowd, found herself grabbing a haggis in her bare fingers, the flesh slipping and warping like soap in her grasp, and as Jiannis’s face yawed huge and grinning next to hers, she shoved it bodily into his mouth. He spluttered and hooted, pawed the dripping flesh off his shirt and skin, licking it off his fingers, sucking it off his clothes, and then Harmony too was covered in hot haggis, and he was licking it off her skin, pawing it from her hair; and there were people on the floor, on their hands and knees, gorging at the shattered meat, scrambling between feet and knees and everywhere Harmony looked there was more meat, more food, a spluttering, animal feast, a wild delight of consumption – because why not?

Why the hell not?

There was nothing in this room that could hurt anyone, not the bacteria trodden beneath their shoes or the meat sucked off a stranger’s flesh. They could eat, eat, eat, feast and gorge and dance and party and she laughed ecstatically, drunk without the alcohol ever having reached her bloodstream, grabbed another relatively whole haggis off a passing tray and shoved it straight into her mouth, half-gagging on the juice and choking on the nuts—

Nutrition is too important to leave to chance. With Balanced Diet, you can pre-program your optimum weight and nutritional requirements, now with added anti-constipation features. Excessive eating may lead to diarrhoea, temporary stomach cramps and cholesterol swellings. If diarrhoea does not reduce after 3 days of liquid intake, please contact your healthcare provider urgently.

—and she’s not sure how much she’s eaten, how far she’s gorged, but her belly aches and the room is spinning and bright and she’s sucking meat off the floor, on her hands and knees literally sucking up meat like a dog, and when she looks up Jiannis is bent over another woman, her shirt pulled up, her head thrown back and mouth open in ecstasy, and he’s licking flesh off her bare, taut belly – taut like Perfect Abs, or maybe Ultimate Athlete – and as she groans, shuffling minced sheep organs into her gaping, rolling mouth, Jiannis’s tongue slithers into her belly button to extract that extra bit of pulverised lung and Harmony thinks—

Harmony thinks that maybe—

“Of course, no real man needs to upgrade *down there* because, well, it’s not the same if you’ve artificially enhanced your . . . ”

“Natural lubrication, naturally secreted from . . . ”

“For the part, I grew horns. It felt really essential to my character, really vital that I had the experience of that stigma, that sense of what it’s like to have horns and how that might drive me to opening the hell-gate and unleashing my servants of darkness upon the heroes and their . . . ”

Harmony stands over Jiannis as the room writhes and crawls in food, flesh, meat and whisky, and waits for him to notice her in his wriggling exploration of this woman’s body, and he doesn’t.

“Jiannis?” Her voice, tiny and lost over the roaring of the room. “Jiannis?”

She taps him on the shoulder, and it is the most stupid thing she’s ever done.

He glances up, grins a bloody grin, “Hey, babe!”

The woman underneath his scarlet-smeared form giggles, pushing her hips against his, fumbling for a bottle of uncorked wine and sloshing down a gulp through purple lips.

“I, uh . . . I don’t feel . . . I think I want to go home.”

“The party’s only just got started!”

“I just . . . I want to go home.”

“Babe, let’s give it another hour; it’d be rude to leave. My friends are here; it’d be really rude – you don’t want to be rude?”

“I really want to go home. Now.”

Something in her tone. Something she hasn’t used for a long while. He pulls himself a little higher, as the woman’s face contracts in surprise, distaste at Harmony’s sharp tongue, flesh-flecked hair, stained, crumpled clothes.

Jiannis straightens up, squares up to her. “Babe,” he whispers, bending in close. “These are my friends. We’re staying.” A sound, just for her, his smile never faltering for the room, one hand caressing her arm, the other reaching round to squeeze her bum.

A moment where she might have argued.

A moment, which in later years she will remember, a paralysis of thought, a shutting down of reason that will come again, the day a woman called Gillian tells her about punitive financial services,

about non-essential systems, about acne and withdrawal and . . .

All of that is to come, of course, but perhaps tonight, for just a moment, the shadow of it reaches back to shroud Harmony in darkness, and as she teeters on the second of choosing, the universe waits.

“OK,” she breathes, and is surprised to feel something hot in the corner of her eye. “Babe,” – a hasty added word – “babe.” “Yeah, sorry, you’re right, yeah, I just . . . need some air, yeah.” Sounds are safe, nodding, smiling, always smiling – smiling is safe. Only when she picks her way over bodies soaked in blood, slipping and sliding on lacerated flesh and smeared skin to the lady’s lav, does she wonder why she wanted to cry.

Chapter 15

This is Harmony Meads, twenty-seven years old.

She lives in her boyfriend's penthouse flat in the tower on the corner of Blackfriars Bridge, and yes, the layout may not be optimal, sounds might carry and the kitchen is a nightmare to clean, but that's why they've got a cleaner and, anyway, the views! The views and the convenience and the prestige of the thing: every time she comes home she feels privileged, privileged to live here. It's just great; it's so great. It's just like the magazines.

She strips naked in the bathroom one day, and stares at herself in the full-length, internally heated zero-condensation Minetti-brand mirror that frames the shower. They've had a lot of sex, she and Giannis, in that shower. Last time, she thought she might even get bored of it, had never imagined she could be bored of his perfect body, his skin tanned to a dusky perfection without ever being exposed to sunlight, melanin fine-tuned to a healthy glow; he was all man. Thrusting man, he was so strong and of course she enjoyed the sex – Elevation made it hard not to have a good shag really – but since it was taken that she'd enjoy the sex he didn't really need to try, and neither did she, and sure her body reacted but there were times when she found herself watching them writhing in the mirror, and it was all . . . It wasn't quite what she'd . . .

So this is Harmony Meads, alone in the shower without the water running, studying her body as if for the very first time. Giannis is late home. He's often out feasting these days, dining with his friends and their digestive upgrades. The stink in the toilet when he gets home is incredible, barely digested slush pumped straight in one end, out the other. Harmony says she has to do "girl things" on those days, and that's OK – there are man things, and there are girl things, and that's the way the world works.

She runs her fingers over her stomach, perfectly flat, not stuffed with chipolata layers of muscle like some women, but feminine,

soft, warm skin to brush, and a firm wall of abs just beneath, a treat to explore, a privilege to touch. She hasn't had any pubic hair for years; but when she lathers her legs, armpits and groin with soap they seem to puff up into something different and hot, as if sensing the change in skin, the sealing touch of the nanos over the place where once hair grew.

Her nails are shellac-hard without needing treatments. Once, when she was at university, she went for a mani-pedi, and it was a real treat, and kinda peculiar, a little uncomfortable in a way, but also amazing, like when a hairdresser washes your hair before cutting. The touch of a stranger's skin on yours, the care taken, a sensation like nothing she's ever been able to mimic on her own since.

Sometimes on her "girl nights" she goes and has her hair washed at the local salon, though it hasn't needed cutting or products for years. The woman who cleans her hair is chubby, overweight. She can't afford that many upgrades but says proudly that she's got one for her hands to keep her skin fresh and healthy, because her hands – her hands are her life.

Harmony likes that. It feels like the woman is a craftswoman, protecting a skill.

Harmony's thighs are skinny, a sudden pop out where they meet her buttocks, the most graceful of curves down towards the tender insides of her knees. She got them modded when Jiannis started buying her the short dresses that he really likes her in. He never told her that they looked fat when she sat down, flesh expanding out either side against the seat of the chair. What were his words?

"Your legs are hilarious," he said, and laughed as if it was funny, but though she was sure he saw the look on her face, he didn't apologise after, or say it was just a joke, or that she was beautiful, the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

She had to take out another credit card to pay for the upgrade, but it was worth it when, four days later, he kissed the inside of her thighs and whispered, "Much better," quiet enough that she might have missed it, but just loud enough that she could hear.

"You're not smiling much these days," muttered Jiannis one weekend as they drove home from a dinner with his golfing friends. "You're such a downer."

The next day, he sent her a link.

Dazzling Smile – no more sad mornings! Before we created Dazzling Smile, women would have to regularly inject themselves with a deadly, paralysing toxin to bring the joy of youth back to their faces. How relieved they are to have a better, nano choice! In the event of sudden blindness, contact your healthcare provider.

She didn't activate it, deleted the email, had a bad day at work.

He said nothing when she came home that evening, and they ordered Chinese – a whole crispy duck, pancakes, plum sauce, chow mein, sweet and sour pork, chicken and cashew nuts, sea bream, egg fried rice, beef and black bean sauce, chilli king prawns and prawn crackers – and watched the TV in silence.

The next day she stood in front of the mirror, and tried to smile, and it hurt.

She bought Dazzling Smile that evening.

It made her face ache for a while, and she didn't like how it made her teeth so prominent, dragging her lips up and back while squeezing her eyes down so her vision sometimes fuzzed round the edge, but everyone else seemed to think it was much better.

Chapter 16

She saw her mum that Christmas, and realised it was the first time in ten months.

Karen Meads didn't like to phone her daughter too much. "You have to live your life, don't you?" she'd exclaim. "Don't need to be worrying about me – I'm a coper!"

Jiannis was busy, so it was just her on the train to Bracknell. Karen met her at the station, which she'd never done before, leaning a little on a stick, head beginning to jut forward, shoulders high, swathed in a pale-blue coat.

Harmony tangled behind a small gaggle of boys pushing through the ticket barrier before breaking out on to the overhanging grey concourse opposite the empty bus station, squinting to bring her mum into focus against the ever-bright, ever-brilliant crinkle in her eyes.

"Dear God!" blurted Karen. "What on earth have you done to your face?!"

Dazzling Smile means that she is grinning ear to ear, a delighted, delightful presence, a laughing, merry explosion of joy as she starts screaming, then and there at her mother. She is pleasurable ecstasy, she is a measure of the goodness and wonder of the world, as she calls her mother a stupid interfering bitch, an ignorant old cow, a fucking shit excuse for a fucking mother, before marching back the way she came, in search of a train for London.

The train to London wasn't for twenty minutes, which was bloody typical, and gave her mum time to talk the man behind the glass into letting her on to the platform, hobbling up behind Harmony to whimper, the horror and pain written on every part of her wrinkled, shrivelled, fungus of a face, "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean it, darling, I'm so sorry, I'm just . . ."

In the end, after ten minutes, and with Karen on the verge of tears, Harmony relented, and they went over the road to the pub

and had a really crap Sunday lunch, with tepid gravy and wet veg,
and didn't really talk, except a little bit about the telly.

Chapter 17

She doesn't ask Jiannis what he's done to his penis, but she knows he's done something, because after it hurts.

"Babe, you're really stiff these days, you're really – just not yourself. Is it work?"

Her eyes laugh with the merriment of Aphrodite, her body a sculpture in bronze, and her voice is dull, cold. "No. It's not work."

"You're not like yourself. You should really try to lighten up."

When he sends her a link to Beta Uplift, she barely bothers to read it before activating the package.

For depressive treatment blah blah blah helping to restore balance to the brain blah blah blah dopamine release over a slow blah blah in the event of stroke please blah blah blah.

It doesn't make her feel better, but she doesn't feel as bad as much. The world becomes a little duller, a little grey. Summer days are merely bright rather than radiant. The sound of rain is just a tapping on metal rather than a dance, majestic from an endless sky. The River Thames, rolling beneath Blackfriars Bridge, is a body of muddy water she has to cross to get to the next party. Credit card debt is a problem, but these things don't matter much. Nothing much matters much. It's all just OK.

He takes her places again, and she hangs out with his friends, and they all smile, and the men are really very strong and fit and beautiful, and the women have magnificent breasts and delightful laughter, and so does she, and that's fine too. That's fine. That's the world that Harmony Meads wanted. That's what she reads about in the magazines.

She does all right at work. Not as well as she used to, but no one seems to care. She is still projecting the right brand aesthetic, and a lot of the customers seem to like the way she's not pushing the hard sell, letting them have space, even though she's clearly desperate.

She's useful for a certain niche, Graham informs her. A certain, puppy-dog niche.

She thinks that these words should shock her, and wonders whether she should think about that revelation a bit more later, and doesn't, because it doesn't matter.

And when Jiannis says, "You shouldn't hang out with those guys any more. They're no good for you," she doesn't argue.

And when Jiannis says, "I've never liked that dress. You should bin it," she does, even though she's had it for years and it's always been her favourite, always looked great in it, because it's easier to bin it than have the fight.

And when he says, "Give me your phone," she does, and he goes through deleting contacts and tweaking her nanos on the app, altering customer-lead parameters, and she sits next to him silent and is grateful that he isn't calling her ugly, or fat, or stupid, and how much he clearly loves her, and how deeply he cares for her well-being.

He proposes marriage, and she would have cried with gratitude, or relief, or the overwhelming sense that yes, this, this is obviously where they were going and once they're married it'll be better, it'll be the best, marriage is the solution for it all – but her tear ducts haven't worked for months, and so she daubs very gently at the lower rim of her eyes with a tissue, careful not to nick her skin with her perfect, pointed nails, thinking that'll achieve much the same effect.

He pays for the wedding dress, and her mum chips in £300 towards the cost of catering. Jiannis roars with laughter when she tells him, head back and chest shaking, brighter with merriment than she's seen him for months. "Is that—? Well, I suppose it means a lot to her!"

The dress is too small.

She tries a corset, but can't breathe properly in it, ribcage popping against the side.

Jiannis says, "Give me your phone," and she does, and as he murmurs, "Babe, this is perfect, you're so perfect, this is going to be the perfect . . ." he buys another app on her credit card, and she watches over his shoulder as it uploads from the Wi-Fi to her phone, from her phone to the nanos in her body, and wonders at the millions of tiny machines running through her blood, self-replicating, sustaining, healing, nurturing, and suddenly thinks that

when she is pregnant – and she will obviously be pregnant one day – she's not sure she *wants* the nanos to be involved, that there is something almost obscene about the idea of a baby engineered with binary code, every piece of it curated by a pre-natal DNA tweak, a diet of data siphoned through her placenta.

And she has just enough time to feel sick at the thought, to feel repulsed at the idea of the monster that's going to grow inside her, before the app on her phone freezes, an error code pops up on the screen, and her world goes black.

Chapter 18

The doctors were quite excited when Harmony Meads nearly died.

They were obviously very worried, very concerned; it is a terrible thing that has happened to her, a really terrible . . . but very *interesting* thing that has happened.

Medical programmers from the Royal London and the Whittington rushed down to join the dissection of faulty and clashing code, to trawl through her logged nano history and poke at her control panel interface. They even got in a couple of ancient old surgeons, with their knives and saws and squelchy old-fashioned ways, just in case they needed to cut her open and do something horrendously, enthrallingly, bloodily analogue. Students flocked to her bed to marvel at her temperature, peer into her vacant, gummy eyes and bicker about the error messages flooding their screens as they prodded and poked at her skin, her bones, her nanos.

She only vaguely knew some of this. Shapes moved and sounds were made, but they were forms without meaning, syllables in the air. When she was awake, it seemed to her that she had never before seen white as white as the lights in the ceiling, or felt the touch of fabric against her skin before, an explosion of contact, nerves roaring a response from ankle to throat, clamouring to be heard. Then she slept, and the darkness was an infinite falling, full of feelings that language could not name, and sights that exceeded colour.

She thought that the machines were dreaming, the nanos in her blood.

She thought that perhaps some part of her had died, and in the place where thought might have been, there were only the nanos, learning to think, live, becoming a part of a new creature's soul.

For three days she lay, breathing through a pipe shoved down her throat, peeing into a bag, while junior doctors with their tablets live-downloading her nano data leaned over to drain fluid from her

spine every eight hours, and tutted when she had a fever, and gossiped with the nurses whenever they thought she couldn't hear them speak.

They sedated her at the end of the fourth day after they realised the extent of the problem. Even through the mist of drugs, she lay awake in the darkness, her mouth open and screaming, screaming, screaming, though no one seemed to hear, her ears roaring with the thump, thump, thump of the sea, her skin dead and numb, her mouth dry no matter how much they gave her to drink, a pinprick of woman trapped in a black hole and screaming, still screaming, until at last they put her into a chemically induced coma after a nurse pointed out that they had drugs for that sort of thing for when the Wi-Fi failed.

Jiannis sat by her side, holding her hand.

Karen arrived on the fifth day, having only just been informed by, of all people, Jazzy from work, who just assumed that Karen knew anyway and wanted to make sure she wasn't coming up to visit by Waterloo, because there were works at Clapham Junction and she'd be better going by Paddington.

When Karen walked through the door, Jiannis took one look at her and said he needed to go and get a fresh shirt, and phoned the hospital during visiting hours to check to see if Karen was still there, and she was, so he wasn't.

Harmony regained consciousness after a consultant from St Mary's suggested they turned her nanos off and back on again. They had tried this before, of course – they weren't amateurs – but this time they ran a staggered reboot, activating only her immune packages, then a couple of the nutritional and cardiac services, and finally uploading an emergency healthcare prescription to start fixing the damage to her organs and nerves, while the rest of her upgrades and boosts sat idle in the Wi-Fi, firewalled off.

There had been, said the leading medic, a conflict of priorities which had led to a catastrophic glitch.

In layman's terms – there were too many programs running on Harmony's system.

The nanos had tried to do too much, and it had broken her.

Jiannis swore he'd sue the backside off Fullife.

Fullife replied, "You will see that there are strict guidelines on programming and cache limits which you exceed *at your own risk*

and in this case we cannot accept liability for . . . ”

Karen held Harmony's hand in hers, didn't seem to care about the cannulas shoved into her veins, the pallor of her skin, the stink of sweat on her warped, crinkled body, and whispered, "If you need to come home, it'd be lovely to have you. I'll cook pasta . . . ”

"Nonsense!" blurted Jiannis. "Harmony will come home with me, and we'll get her back to normal in a few weeks. There's a wedding to plan!"

Harmony lay on the hospital bed, back raised up a little too high, bottom sliding perpetually down towards a little trough in the mattress, and let them talk while the nanos dreamed of electric darkness.

Chapter 19

This is Harmony Meads, aged twenty-nine, as Ibrahim the estate agent lets her cry in his office and gives her more tissues from the little travel pack his wife always makes him carry because she can't stand his sneezing.

Her backside spills out over the edges of the chair she sits on. When she nods, layers of skin bubble and flow, walrus-like, beneath her chin. When she shakes her head, the soft flesh around her jaw seems to trail a little bit behind the rest of her, like a flag caught in the wind. Her chubby fingers poke, futile, at the screen of her mobile phone. She has to sleep with a hot water bottle beneath her right hip, even in summer, because there's an ache there that she can't get rid of but which Fullife assures her is just the side effect of her bone structure changing now she's no longer being supported by Hale and Hearty and her body is reverting to running things for itself. She has athlete's foot, the skin peeling in thick white strands. The acne down her back and chest is less individual spots than contours poked with cathedrals and churches of pus, an ordnance survey of rupturing, diseased flesh.

Ibrahim lends her £500 from his own pocket.

She does the sensible thing and pays off what she still owes to her landlady, the outstanding bailiff's fee from her old place and her water bill. That leaves her £80. She tries to give it to Fullife, but before she can make the transfer, the money is gone, sucked away automatically by the credit card company to cover her outstanding debt.

She doesn't notice particularly when Fullife tunes down her libido to a dull, grey nothing on continued non-payment. It's not like she's going to get much anyway. The nanos shut down her L-cones after three months at the maxed-out debt cap, and the colours red and green vanish from her world.

She goes back to Ibrahim.

“I just . . . £500 was kind, you were so kind, but I’m . . . I’m . . . begging. That’s what I’m doing. I’m begging. I’m begging you. I can’t—I’m begging.”

Ibrahim smiled without his eyes, and she knew what that smile was, knew what it meant and knew that she was without hope. “I’m sorry, Harmony. I’m really sorry. I don’t know what we can do for you.”

Chapter 20

This is the world drained of colour.

Grass is a withered, muddy yellow-brown, laced with spines of grey.

The brilliant crimson of a woman's lips is an ochre smear on her blueish skin.

Oranges, yellows and limes, laid out in boxes at the local greengrocer, have waxy, stubborn skins and hues of slimy faded grey, like the wet mud of the river when the tide pulls back. She runs her fingers over them, suddenly no longer trusting to the familiar shapes of the fruit, and can't smell their sweetness, and finds they taste only of acid in her mouth.

Tomato sauce is the colour of scrambled eggs.

Double-decker buses, painted shades of sludge, grunt by in streets of chemically drenched autumn. Sometimes she passes a child in brilliant-blue rubber boots, or a woman with a yellow scarf around her neck, and she has to stop herself from standing still and staring, dazzled by the brightness of it, a flash of astonishing life in the sullen wasteland she moves through.

Ibrahim keeps her on the books as long as he can, but in the end her performance isn't enough, and head office has spotted it, and he has to put her on administrative leave.

"When you're better, when this is . . . better," he said, "you can come back. There'll always be a place for you here."

He's not lying. Lying would imply an active intent to deceive. But it's easier to make a promise of this sort – an impossible promise – when they both know she'll never come back.

She sells what little she owns – laptop at the pawn shop, a couple of quid for the nicer of her clothes – and goes home, back to Bracknell.

Chapter 21

The day before she was going to be discharged from hospital, Jiannis sat down next to Harmony's bed and said, "Give me your phone."

"What?"

"You're coming home tomorrow, but you can't live looking like . . . well . . . " A gesture, taking in her sallow skin, the bruising beneath her eyes, flesh turned to putty by the ravages of medicine.

Harmony felt her fingers tighten round the phone in her hands, while across the ward a nurse checked the prescription updating to a woman in the bed opposite, whose family had not visited, and who hadn't woken up. "I . . . Why do you want my phone?"

"We need to choose your updates very carefully. Selective. None of this free-for-all; we need to make sure you make only the best, carefully curated choices."

He wasn't even looking at her as he spoke, but flicking through his phone, checking photos of women, updates they'd experienced, how it had affected their bodies, holding up his screen occasionally to compare the image of a model to Harmony's sprawled out, gown-clad body in bed, as if checking a portrait against a suspected fake.

"I'm . . . I don't think I'm ready for this yet," she blurted.

"Don't be ridiculous – give me your phone."

Her fingers tightened. "No."

"Harmony." A slow chide of irritation, the wiser man dismissing a child's complaint, and it reminded her of something. What was that feeling?

("Don't you have upgrades?")

"Clearly you've made bad choices in the past; that's why you're here. We need to be better, make better choices. I've done a lot of thinking about this and I really think . . . " He reached out to grab her phone, and she snatched it away.

"Don't touch my fucking phone!"

Her voice rang out across the ward, loud enough for the nurse to glance up from her tablet, face twitching in disapproval and surprise. Jiannis rocked back, eyes flickering around the room to see if anyone else had noticed this shameful outburst. "Babe, you're being . . . "

"Don't touch it," she snarled. "Don't fucking touch it!"

A moment of astonishment. No one has talked to him like this for years. He doesn't know what to do about it. He hasn't had to deal with such . . .

But it's a hospital ward. Generally speaking, abusing patients is considered Not Cool, and will be bad for his kudos. "All right," he hissed, soft and slow beneath his breath. Then again: "All right. You're clearly not yet in your right state of mind. That's fine. I'll pick you up tomorrow and then we'll talk about this properly when you get home, yes? Yes." Standing up in a single movement, shoving his phone into his pocket. "Yes," he concluded, argument settled, problem solved. "That's what we'll do. Fine."

Without a word, he marched away, and Harmony changed the password on her phone the moment he was out of the room.

Chapter 22

It was the sound of someone playing the piano that drew Harmony's attention.

Visiting hours were ending, but not many families made it to 8 p.m. through the ritual of dinner – school dinner sausages and rice pudding – or the flurry of nurses checking for sores, draining a swollen cyst, shaking heads at blood pressure. Visitors liked the quiet hours, the gentle moment on the ward where nothing much was happening and they could focus on clean, cordial emissions of care without the sticky biological stuff or reality of hospital life getting in the way of their compassion.

At first, after she regained consciousness, Harmony strictly obeyed all the nurses' commands, stayed in bed, drank plenty of water and let someone know when she was going to the lav, reduced to a four-year-old again. Then she saw other patients sneaking out for a fag, or popping down to the shop on the ground floor to buy a naughty chocolate bar, and the nurses either didn't notice or didn't care, so when she got bored, she also started wandering. There was TV to entertain her, and internet for £15 a day, but it made her eyes hurt and the longer she spent on the ward, the louder it seemed to be. Beeping which had been hushed on Monday was, by Thursday, a deafening cacophony without end. The groaning of a woman whose nanos couldn't take away the pain – "Perhaps it's in her head?" a doctor whispered – made Harmony curl up, knees to chest, hands over her ears, begging for it to stop, for the woman to sleep, lapse into a coma, die.

Whereas the corridors, after visiting hours, were empty, silent, cold and grey. They were rain after drought, a cool place of stillness only occasionally punctuated by someone rushing by with a gurney, the rattle of the wheels rising and falling like a motorbike on an empty country lane. So Harmony drifted, body weak and weary, stopping on benches in Oncology and Dermatology whenever she

needed to rest, pausing to catch her breath at Imaging 3 and Gynaecology, the doors shut up for the day, the patients packed off to bed.

She heard the piano while crossing a walkway over one of the hospital's big, internal atriums, a courtyard of red brick, blue metal, potted plants in cat litter and dirty green glass. She got turned around at Sarah Ward as she tried to work her way down to it, but picked up her route again by the all-faith chapel and shuffled the walk of the gown-clad penitent towards the music.

In the middle of the atrium, framed by bamboo and hardy stiff-limbed grasses that no one need care about too much, was a grand piano. On Wednesday and Thursday lunchtimes, a sign said, there were concerts. Everyone was welcome. Donations were appreciated.

The woman who played was not holding a concert. She was pear-shaped, her breasts beginning to droop with age, and disguised this horrendous truth with a long black cardigan and baggy trousers, creating from her sinking shape no shape at all. She had hair fading to grey, which seemed to be passing through purple and blue on its journey, her body unsure how it wished to age, and damned if it would do so gracefully. She wore four rings, three on her left hand, one on her right, and hunched like a crow over the keys, producing runs of sound and falls of music that couldn't be called a tune, but still managed to hold Harmony in her place.

The woman played for one other: a creature even more ancient and decrepit than herself. This older lady was strapped into a giant blue chair, closer to a sunbather on wheels than a wheelchair, padded and blue. Beneath the straps that held her were layers of woolly pink blanket, none quite big enough to cover all of her, and so a patchwork of interlaced squares spread out instead to form a fluffy cocoon. Her hair looked like a fistful of bubble bath dolloped on her scalp; her skin was grey-white, threaded with blue-black veins. Her green eyes were open, and stared at nothing much. Yellow-tinted spit rolled off her great, protruding lower lips, and if she breathed, the motion was so tiny that Harmony couldn't see it at first.

Yet it was clear that this was the lady for whom the music was made, and she was perhaps the mother of the woman dressed in black, caught in a moment of vacancy.

The music finished.

The woman looked up.

Saw Harmony, and smiled.

Stood up; went to her mother, daubed spit away from her mouth casually, a habitual act, then looked up again quickly, as if only just remembering how a stranger might feel about this, unused to such things; smiled, an apology, a shrug with the lips – you know how it is.

Harmony tried to smile back. The muscles were weak, ached, it was hard to remember how to move her face to show these feelings.

Maybe that's why the woman spoke. Maybe she just needed to speak.

"Mum's ninety-seven," she explained, staring at nothing much, wiping her fingers on a crumpled tissue with a coffee shop's name half-lost in the stained old folds. "She's had cancer, heart failure, diabetes . . . only she hasn't. She hasn't. She has excellent health insurance. Dad saw to that before he . . . It's so good that these things only get a few seconds head start, a clot in the aorta and boom! Dealt with. Trouble with glucose? No worries. The nanos are keeping her alive, in good nick actually . . . They're doing all right."

She hesitated, glancing again at Harmony, trying to read the other woman's expression. Harmony opened her mouth to say something, to explain that she wasn't frowning, or dumb, that there was simply something wrong with her face. But the moment the words rose to her lips, she closed them. How fucking stupid did it sound?

The woman nodded, fears confirmed and, putting the tissue back in her pocket straightened up to grasp the back of her mother's giant, stretched out chair.

"Her mind's mostly gone, of course. Mostly gone. They tried an experimental process on her, nanos for the brain, something to fill in the broken neurons, but it didn't work. She could talk and feed herself again, but it wasn't her. It wasn't her. It was just . . . some algorithm. It made her behave funny, do funny things; in the end we had to shut it down. Felt like shutting her down, but I thought . . . she wouldn't want to be this. Now she's just waiting to die. Does that sound terrible?"

Harmony shook her head. She could do that much.

"I play piano for her. I think she likes it. She probably doesn't. But it makes me feel like I'm doing something. She's been like this for five years now. They say with nanos she could live to be a hundred and twenty-five." A little intake of breath, a thought not

uttered.

The woman perhaps wants to say, “That’s my life. That’s my whole life. That’s the next twenty-eight years gone, waiting.”

But she doesn’t.

That wouldn’t be kind, or proper.

So instead she smiles again, apologising, and pushes her mother away.

Harmony didn’t see them again, and thought perhaps she’d been dreaming a digital dream.

Chapter 23

The ride back from hospital to Blackfriars was silent. Two people stared out of opposite windows. The fare was £7.20, and Jiannis looked for a moment at Harmony as if she might pay, dressed in the same clothes she'd been admitted in eight days ago, the day the world ended.

She didn't look at him, and he put it on his credit card.

Upstairs, in the apartment, she went straight to bed and lay on her side, facing the wall.

After a while, he lay down next to her.

"You know I love you," he said at last. "You know you're special to me."

She didn't answer.

He tried holding her for a while, but it didn't last. Eventually he got up, went round to her side of the bed, picked up her mobile phone from the bedside table. Tried to open it. "Babe, what's the password?"

She didn't answer.

"Seriously?" he hissed. "*Seriously?*"

Threw the phone down on the bed beside her, marched away.

The estate agents sent her a "get well soon" card.

A day later, Graham called, asked when she'd be back. "There's a lot to do, you see, a very exciting time in the market."

Jiannis went out feasting, dining, golfing, drinking, drugging with his friends, and came home sober, calm, perfect, with shit that stank of vodka and piri-piri chicken.

Karen called. "Darling, you know you can come home any time . . ."

"I'm fine, Mum."

"Of course you are, dear. It's just a mother's prerogative to worry. But I know you're fine. I know you'll cope."

It occurred to Harmony that she should look up “dopamine withdrawal”, but it seemed hard – really hard – to do it. She could itemise the tasks involved one at a time, even imagine herself achieving them, but whenever she went to move her arm towards her phone it seemed futile, wearisome. So she lay, facing the wall, and time rolled by.

“I’m going to – no, I’m going to – *I’m not going until I’ve . . .*”

Voices raised from the door. Jiannis actually starting to shout; it’s been a while since he’s shouted, or maybe he’s not. Maybe he’s talking at his ordinary level and she just hasn’t heard him speak for a while; these things are hard to measure.

“Get out of my flat. *Get out of my fucking . . .*”

Jazzy burst into the bedroom, perfume, mascara, crimson lips, sex in a little black dress, fire and light and perfection in high heels, took one look at Harmony and exclaimed, “Fuck’s sake, what have you fucking done?”

Jiannis couldn’t get rid of Jazzy without physically hurting her.

Touch me, she said, and I’ll call the police.

“It’s OK,” mumbled Harmony from where she lay. “It’s OK.”

“I’m going out,” snarled Jiannis, snatching his coat from the back of the white leather chair by the unused, untouched make-up table. “Don’t stay up!”

The door slammed hard enough to rock the monochrome art photos on the wall, all architect’s lines, hard light and unknown torsos of beautiful women. They’d come with the flat; they were part of the cohesive aesthetic that was so . . . was so . . .

Harmony couldn’t remember what it was. Wasn’t sure if she cared.

Jazzy kneeled down by the side of the bed and stared at Harmony for a long while. There was a thing in the older woman’s face that might have almost been sympathy, or perhaps more likely pity. Pity for the broken woman. Pity for a little, lesser thing.

Then Jazzy said, “Your boyfriend is such an arsehole,” and it turned out it was sympathy after all.

Chapter 24

Harmony moved out of the Blackfriars flat two days later.

Jazzy didn't help her move boxes – “Darling, that's not my style!” – but phoned her seven times to make sure she was doing it, to exclaim, “Don't stop for the wanking cock-shite!” and “Forget that fucker!” and other odes to encouragement.

Jiannis screamed at her. “Stay there! STAY THERE! STAY RIGHT THERE! YOU WILL DO AS YOU'RE FUCKING TOLD!”

And when that didn't work, and the man with a van – little more than a kid, eighteen years old with sticking up, gel-slick hair – found the entire thing objectionable enough to overcome his universal apathy and plant himself squarely between Jiannis and Harmony, he seemed to crack.

“Babe, I love you,” he exclaimed. “I love you. I've only ever wanted to look after you, you know that. I've only ever wanted the best for you. We're going to get married; we're going to get married; it's going to be – you know I've only ever wanted to . . . ”

She wanted to tell him that she knew he was wrong. That he had programmed her to be happy. He had drugged her not to care. But she thought that if she said it, she'd run out of energy, any energy at all, she'd never make it into the lift, and besides, the boy with the van would judge her, would marvel that she'd let things get this far, and right now it mattered so much to her – so much – that this stranger didn't think she was stupid.

So she said nothing at all.

In the end, Jiannis threw himself in front of her, kneeling, pressing his head against the burgundy luxury Saxony heavyweight carpet that lined the corridor by the gorgeous Bontoft-brand polished black titanium elevators, and when the lift came she stepped past him, and the boy carrying the last of her boxes made a tut-hiss sound between his puckered lips and shook his head as if to say, “Mate, like . . . mate!” – which was, in its way, the ultimate

condemnation a man might give.

Harmony moved into a bedsit in Lambeth, Phuong and Hailey above, Mr and Mrs Patel below.

"I can laugh when things ain't funny, hey, hey, hey, hey!" trilled Mr Patel in the shower.

"I can't!" hollered Mrs Patel from the room next door. "I don't think anyone else can either!"

Jazzy joined her that first night, and brought a bottle of champagne.

For the first time in a very, very long while, Harmony got drunk. A real drunk.

**You appear to be above your recommended alcohol limit.
Would you like to browse our range of products?**

"Fuck men," exclaimed Jazzy, stretching out her long, curved legs in silk stockings. "Fuck them. Never liked Jiannis. Pompous prat."

"I know you're saying that to make me feel better, but please don't."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because it makes me feel stupid. It makes me feel like . . . like it was so obvious like . . . why did I even stay with him?"

"For the sex!"

"Was that it?"

"And the apartment. Jesus, I'd have shagged him for sex and the apartment, but he's still an arsehole."

"He told me he loved me."

"Fucking *men*."

"When it was good, when he was . . . when he was kind it was . . . and when he wasn't I desperately wanted him to be kind again, for it to be good again, for him to be pleased. And when he was, it was such a relief. I was so grateful that he was kind to me, it was a buzz, like – does that make sense?"

She is drunk; it is fantastic. She is swollen with food, bloated and vulgar, she is repulsive and stuck in a shitty little room near Streatham Hill, wherever the fuck that is, and is almost dizzy with the relief of it, she might fly; she might soar up through the ceiling. As soon as Jazzy is gone, she's going to strip off naked and wobble round the flat waving her arms like a child, flapping a pigeon-flap

to see if she can soar just by dreaming.

“Jazzy?”

“Yeah?”

“I didn’t think, I mean of everyone down the office – I didn’t think you were kind. I didn’t think that was who you were.”

“Darling, you’ll make me go all soppy.”

“I mean it. You’re so . . . You’ve got all the upgrades, you’re so confident, you’re so – like, you make every choice for you, not for anyone else, and you’re so good on it, you look so great but like, it’s this greatness that if you didn’t have the upgrades feels like you’d still be amazing, you know? I’ve had a lot to drink. This feels, I mean, this *feels* . . .”

Her voice trailed off into the sugary occlusion of her empty glass.

For a long time, Jazzy was quiet, staring up at the sloping, shallow ceiling as if she could see through to the surface of the moon. Then she murmured, her voice the softest, most human thing Harmony had ever heard, “It makes me feel good to be beautiful. It makes me feel confident. It makes me feel like who I am inside is reflected on the outside. I like the way people look at me. I like that it gives me choice. I can choose to say yes, because the option is on the table. I can choose to say no, because it’s my body, my life. The power of that – of being able to choose – is a rush, it’s the greatest drug, it’s . . . Most people can’t, you see. They think they can choose, but all they’re doing is deciding between one fuck-up or another fuck-up, trapped in their little hourglass lives like that’s all there’s ever going to be. I know what I am. I know what I want. Fuck if anyone will ever tell me how to live, or to be someone else. This is me.”

She rolled the stem of a champagne glass between her fingers, head drifting back over the arm of the cramped, blue sofa pressed against the wall barely a foot from the end of Harmony’s bed. “I’m great at my job. I’m going to be promoted very soon. I choose this. It’s my choice. It doesn’t have to mean anything. Not unless I want it to. I was hired by men. The people who promote me are going to be men.”

They sprawled across the room, silent a while, Harmony belly-down on her new bed, while upstairs Hailey and Phuong hollered commands at each other – “Switch to sniper, switch to sniper, YEEEESSSSSS!”

Finally, Jazzy swung her legs off the sofa, using the momentum to pivot herself upright, depositing the glass down in a single swoop of long, perfect limbs. Without looking at Harmony, she said, "You'll need to turn more of your upgrades back on if you want to continue at the office. They'll pretend you won't, but you will. You've already paid for them, so might as well. Forget the stupid shit Jiannis was pumping you with. You made good choices back in the day. You did all right. Come into work Monday looking fabulous, and you'll change the story. Not the little crying girl, but the woman who came good. That's what they need to see. You need to make it happen. That's all. That's my advice."

"Thanks, Jazzy."

"Whatever. Tell any of the boys I helped you and I'll rinse you."

"Got it."

Rising to her feet, a single, uncurling, slightly stooped figure beneath the beams of Harmony's roof. Jazzy nodded at a distant thought just beyond Harmony's head, once, then turned away. "Good night, Harmony. Try not to fuck up again."

Chapter 25

This is Harmony Meads, twenty-eight years old, alone at last in her bedroom in Lambeth, choosing who it is she will be.

Jazzy is right – she’s already paid for the upgrades. The hospital shut most of them down, altered their start-up sequence to prevent glitching, but the list is still there, waiting. She can’t believe how long it is. She can’t believe that this is what her life became.

Several are already running. Dermaglow, Powerful Poise – the hospital left them active for fear of unexpected and distressing consequences if they were shut down after so long in her system. She also re-engaged a couple of minor tweaks, a bit of boost for her hair, something for her teeth. After thinking about it, she didn’t re-engage her anti-toxin, anti-bloating, anti-alcohol screens.

She would simply say no.

This is Harmony, standing in front of her tiny bathroom mirror in the house where the pipes sing like a robotic Christian choir, learning how to smile again.

It’s hard, at first.

Old muscles around her mouth are saggy and slow to respond after so long on Dazzling Smile, and the time she spent without her dental upgrades has made her gums bright red, and oddly swollen.

She tries grinning, and the pain around her eyes and ears is intense.

She tries smiling a smaller, demure flash of lip, hint of tooth, and it seems like a girly simper.

She tries relaxing her face, and then thinking of something funny, but it’s hard to think of funny things right now.

She puts on a few videos she’s always liked from YouTube – kittens, a comical panda, stuff like that – and sort of does begin to smile a bit.

It’s hard and slow, but she’ll get there.

She’ll get there.

On Monday, she goes back to work.

Chapter 26

This is Harmony Meads, back in the Bermondsey estate agent, doing OK.

She's going to be OK.

She's not what she once was. It's hard. Her body adjusts slowly to the loss of so many upgrades. Her smile hurts. Sometimes she cries at night. Sometimes she's manic, can't stop talking, her brain a fizzle-pop of ideas, sounds, sensations, all of which are very, very important and need to be said right now!

And though she hasn't yet broken and called her mum, and though she's now living in a crappy little room in Lambeth, the debt is OK.

If she's careful.

She sits down and does a bit of maths. Not the scary maths, not the numbers that reveal the truth of what her life is, has been, will be. Just a bit of in-out, balancing the books. Taking back control.

Her minimum monthly repayments to the credit card companies are £263. If she pays that amount every month, on time, and doesn't get any more overdrawn, she'll have paid back everything by 2055. The total cost of her repayments on her £11,000 debt will, by that time, be around £119,928. If she can pay it back faster, she'll pay less.

She scrolls through her phone. Dozens of upgrades are still listed as purchased, still being paid for. The termination fee is usually seventy-five per cent of the overall cost. She checks her bank balance, and doesn't have the money to pay a termination fee, not after putting down a deposit on her bedsit. It's not cheaper, but it is easier just to let the contracts tick on, until they run out, and simply not renew. One by one they'll vanish from her phone. Upgrades for wobbly thighs, for calves that squelch in tight trousers. Upgrades for perfectly carved ankles, to prevent having a runny nose when it's cold, or to erase moles from her body. Upgrades for feeling

happy, upgrades to smooth out knobbly knees, or to stop her bum getting spotty and red from too long sat in the office chair. Movie stars don't have spotty red bottoms.

Until they lapse, and even with a decent salary, she's still spending two hundred pounds a month more than she can afford.

In the end, she sold her TV. She didn't watch TV much anyway, and could stream most things on her laptop. That got her about £180. If she didn't go to the pub with the office and was careful with her shop – she could squirrel another £30 or so back from her weekly expenditure. That gave her £210 in hand, enough to terminate a couple of the more expensive upgrades, claw back that monthly outgoing. It didn't feel as good as spending it on something necessary or saving it for a rainy day, but she knew that spending it now would save money later.

She stared at the list for a long time, adding up termination fees.

K-blast and Zenblood.

She juggled numbers around, sometimes factored her mum's upgrades in, then immediately factored them out. Thought of phoning Karen. It would be easy – so very easy – just to tell her mum, “Hey, yeah, I'm in some difficulty . . . ”

It would be hard, impossibly hard, to phone her mum and tell her the truth.

She was a coper, after all. The Meads didn't get in trouble; they didn't crack under pressure. They coped.

Eventually, she called up Fullife and terminated a bundle of medium-cost upgrades, watching the money vanish from her account as quickly as it had appeared, and the purchase list on her phone grow a little shorter.

That left her with £28 spare a month. She'd be fine.

She'd be fine.

Chapter 27

It wasn't blackmail in the end.

Blackmail is such a wicked word.

Jiannis just put up some old photos of her he had. He'd liked taking photos of her, a bunch to celebrate each upgrade, even the upgrades that were . . . intimate.

OH WOW, IS THAT YOUR EX? SHE IS HOOOOOTTTT!

Jesus, what a slut.

Get a load of that!

She only heard about it three or four days after he started posting. She'd blocked him, lost his number, his email address. It took a friend of a friend texting her with, *"Don't know if you know, but your ex is doing something shitty on Facebook. You should check it out."* for Harmony to discover the truth.

She called him that evening. "What the fuck are you fucking doing?!"

"Oh, so you can call me, can you? I've been worried about you. I've been sick with worry."

"What the fuck are you doing with my pictures?"

"I'm just posting some photos, remembering the good times. You want to meet up sometime?"

"No, I do not want to meet up. Take those fucking pictures down right now!"

"Uh, no, it's my Facebook page."

"It's my body."

"Given how much time I spent working on it, I'd say it's our body."

"I'm going to report you."

"Babe, there's no need to be like that. I miss you, OK? I'm in pain, and I miss you – I've been so low without you, you don't understand how low I've been. I was angry with you at first but I'm not now. I understand that I did things that you think hurt you.

There are things about me you don't know. There's been real trouble in my life. Meet me and I'll explain it all."

"I just want those pictures gone."

"Forget the pictures, OK? Forget the fucking pictures. Come over tonight."

"No."

"Listen, I forgive you, OK? You don't have to be frightened. I forgive you for everything. I love you."

"Please. Please. Just . . . just get rid of them."

"Babe, babe, you're not listening to me. You're not listening to me. Babe . . ."

She hung up, and for the first time in a while cried, and it made her ugly and weak.

She reported him to Facebook.

Facebook sent an automatically generated response saying they'd look into it. She couldn't reach anyone human to talk about it.

Oh WOW, I didn't know they let you post pictures like this . . .

Mate, you should sell this stuff, seriously, this is gold.

I'd do that ass, yes I would.

Jazzy came to her, when the boys started avoiding her gaze.

"Sweetheart, Harmony, seriously. Girl to girl, heart to heart – everyone's seen them and you need to get him to take those fucking photos down."

Harmony needed a drink, and her £28 in hand at the end of the month vanished.

She met Jiannis for a cup of coffee. She insisted on it being a public place.

"Jesus, Harmony, I don't know why you're so stiff about this!"

They met on the South Bank, at the concert hall, while below children galloped through purple light and blue spinning splotches of colour, and the river reflected shards of sodium, neon and LED red off spinning black waters.

She was shaking when she arrived, and Jazzy came along, sitting one floor up, back turned to them, pretending to read a book, left hand locked around her mobile phone.

Jiannis pulled his chair too close to hers, grabbed her hand between his and whispered, "Babe, I love you. You know I love you; you can feel it. I know you can."

"I just want it to stop."

"I'm nothing without you. I'm going to die without you. Come home. You need to come home. I'll look after you. I'll buy whatever you want."

"No. I want you to take the photos down. I've spoken to a lawyer."

"I only posted them because I'm proud of you, of who you were, of how beautiful you used to be. I'm just proud."

"You're not," she snapped. "You controlled my body and my world. You're not proud. I want them gone."

He leaned back, releasing her hand, flinging it back into her lap, lips curling. There were tears in his eyes, and she realised with a moment of sheer, mind-boggled bewilderment, that he meant it. That he knew himself to be the victim. That he *knew* she was wrong. That even if tomorrow he met the next most beautiful woman in the world and married her and was happy for ever after, he would still look back on this moment, this second in time, and know that everything he said was true and absolute, unchanging as the mountain high.

He didn't shout, except once, when he threatened to kill himself and roared that she was an unfeeling bitch.

Then people turned to stare, and Jazzy left her seat on the floor above to come to the balcony's edge, peering down, face white and teeth bared. That seemed to make Jiannis feel better, as the shame of staring, accusing eyes on Harmony's face made her burn – how profoundly crimson her skin blazed as her body adjusted to a life without Control My Blush – and, sitting back down again, he snapped, "Looking after you was very expensive. I spent a lot of time and money on you."

Harmony had wondered if this would come up. Technically it was true, but as much as he had spent on her, she had felt compelled to spend in excess of what she had, pulled into a lifestyle that she couldn't afford, and wasn't even sure, looking back, she had enjoyed. Perhaps she had. Perhaps wanting to find it magical had made it so.

"I can . . . I can pay you back," she stammered, and it was a lie, but it was the only thing left. The only way to take control. "I can . . ."

"I don't need money." Not even looking at her, a dismissal, powerful again, made powerful by her offer.

"Towards the rent, or something, like . . . two hundred pounds?"

“Babe, that’s less than a week.”

“Five hundred?”

“You can’t buy me back.”

“I just want us to be . . . for things to be fair between us. Settled. I want to . . . close things off.”

In the end, she promised him £700. He didn’t need the money; that wasn’t the point.

Most of her credit cards were maxed out, but there was one which extended her overdraft without her even needing to talk to the bank. She just needed to click on a box on her online banking, and that was that.

Jazzy exploded. “YOU GAVE HIM MONEY? Now he thinks he can fucking control you! He *can* control you! You think the photos are going to go away? You think this makes it better? HE OWNS YOU NOW!”

At first, she thought Jazzy was wrong.

The photos vanished from Facebook, and stayed vanished for three weeks, and she didn’t pursue her complaint with the company.

Then they began to return, along with missed calls from an unknown number.

She texted him:

Take down the photos and stop calling me.

He replied:

I don’t know what you mean.

She got a lawyer to send him a letter. That cost £240.

A moderator finally saw the images of her naked flesh paraded online and removed them. Didn’t shut down the account – that would have been a bit much – but sent Jiannis a warning over inappropriate content.

Jazzy said, “You just have to ignore him. That’s all that’s left. I’ve got a friend in the police; she says that if they haven’t broken the law, that’s all you can do. It’s all you can do.”

And in the end, it was.

By then it was too late.

Chapter 28

The pimple on her chin was the first sign that the debt was out of control.

“Are my nanos malfunctioning? Do I need to go to hospital? Is there a programming error? Are they . . . doing things?”

“ . . . so there are a few boosts that will be shutting down in the next twenty-four hours, including Rise and Shine, Fresh and Perky, Powerful Poise . . . ”

“So, Harmony. This office, it’s . . . well, it’s a very specific clientele we deal with, and our people, they’re the brand. The boys in Enfield are great; they’re really . . . ”

Jiannis stopped trying to contact her three months after the Enfield move. No one at the office knew any of Jiannis’s friends, so they hadn’t seen the photos, didn’t know every detail of her body.

Not that they would have believed it was her, not that sexy, lithe, writhing athlete in the pictures. Not their chubby, spotty Harmony Meads with her flaking skin and thinning hair. Not that goddess.

“When you’re better, when this is . . . better,” Ibrahim said, “you can come back. There’ll always be a place for you here.”

This is Harmony Meads, thirty years old, going back to Bracknell.

Her mum meets her at the station, and they get a cab.

The semi-detached she grew up in always stank of Karen, of old woman’s flaking skin, of forgetting to flush the toilet and cheap bright-green washing-up liquid. For a moment, Harmony thinks she can smell it, and wonders if her nose is back, if sense is returning – but it’s just imagination, her brain filling in a gap where feelings should be, plugging her senses with what should be, what could be, anything except the reality of what is.

She doesn’t hear from her London friends. One or two drop her

an email occasionally, but mostly they forget. Their lives are busy, bright, hectic, and Bracknell is a long way out of town. Even if you don't miss the train, there's half an hour of walking to do on the other end, along pavements strewn with rotting leaves and cracked conkers, fallen from ancient trees pressed against the walls of the old people's care homes and public swirls of green, a reminder of the great forest that once ruled this dimple in the earth.

Harmony doesn't leave her room for three days. Karen goes power walking, 8 a.m. on the dot on Wednesdays and Fridays, the chatter and trill of "Oh Carrrooooo!!! Whoo-hooo!" bursting into the flat from tracksuited women with pale dyed perms like a foghorn in a cloister. Even though Karen has a walking stick, she still goes out with them, using two mountaineering poles to help her keep up the pace, and swinging along merrily at the back with a cry of "Don't worry about me, ladies!"

On the third day, Karen gets Jenni, the old schoolfriend, to come and visit. Harmony hasn't seen Jenni for years, hasn't kept in touch, but Karen doesn't know much about Harmony's London life and so reaches out to the only contact she remembers, and who is still in Bracknell.

Jenni studied economics at Warwick University, was going to be an academic, did most of a PhD, but in the end came back to Bracknell to get married, have kids, raise a family. For a while, as she witters on about the nursery and day care and trying to find non-gendered shoes for her baby daughter, so as not to bias her into thinking she has to be a princess, Harmony despises this perky, ordinary woman sat on her mum's settee. She barely has any upgrades – just a couple to keep her going when the kids leave her knackered, and to help her body make the most of sleep – and slouches with a mug of coffee in her hand and a baby dribbling in her lap, snot and spit and little puckered lips. She is in a single second of revelation everything that Harmony hates about this place, about this humiliation. She snaps, "Well, good to see you. I'm sure you must be going," and marches into the kitchen to do the washing-up: anything, anything at all to look like she's busy.

And Jenni doesn't seem to mind or care and trails along behind her with a merry, "Oh no, we're not picking Jo-Jo up until two and I went to the shops this morning especially so I could have time to see you, didn't we, Si-Si? Yes, we did, *yes, we did!*"

Karen has deliberately "gone to the post office" that morning,

though what could be that urgent or take that long, Harmony cannot imagine. When she comes home, plastic bag full of pasta, cheese, mince and tinned tomatoes, she very politely doesn't ask how seeing Jenni was, or how Harmony is doing, but simply exclaims, "Lasagne tonight! I know you like the crispy bits!"

That's the night that Harmony checks her phone and sees that K-blast and Zenblood have both reached the end of their contract.

Do you want to renew?

Chapter 29

One day, Harmony started going for walks by herself.

Nothing provoked this. There was no bolt of lightning from the sky.

She walked because where before she had not wanted to, now she did.

Got out of that room because it was time.

She lived on benefits, which didn't pay her way, and her debt did not decrease, even though the credit card companies gobbled up her meagre income before she could even buy food with it, and she didn't pay rent, and slowly her body learned to adjust to life without upgrades.

The hair loss slowed, and her mum got her mate Christina round to do her hair, and when she first suggested it Harmony snarled, "That bitch isn't touching my head!"

And then she thought about it, and realised that she hadn't had a haircut for years, and remembered Christina as quiet and gentle, and not to be blamed for her mother's oppressive, offensive, irredeemable kindness, crushing Harmony like a ton of feathers.

So she said, "Actually. Yeah. I think Christina could be . . . Yeah."

Christina was in her early seventies, but still had the moves with the scissors. She set Harmony up in the kitchen, washed her hair with something that she couldn't smell and set to on the muddy, drained lengths.

She went short, a pixie-cut that made her ears stick out. Her neck felt unnatural, exposed, light, a huge weight of shorn locks, a foot or more of it, tumbling to the ground like spiderweb spinning in the breeze.

"It's good for the hair to be given a chance to grow," mused Christina, running her fingers through the tufty, shorn-down top of her scalp. "It's good sometimes to start again."

Karen watched and said nothing, and Harmony remembered then that she probably did love her mother after all, and had never been given any reason to be anything other than grateful.

Her skin settled a little. She still had pores, great gaping pores, bubbles of black and hollows of pink all across her face but this was, her mother calmly informed her, normal. Just what normal was.

Her weight gain stabilised. When she bent over, the fat in her belly buckled like the crushed hull of the *Titanic*; her thighs and backside spread wide across the rough striped seat of the bus to the shops. The suitcase of clothes she'd worn when she was beautiful, of straps and strings, of exposed flesh and curving seams, remained unopened under the childhood bed. She bought clothes from the discount store at the shopping centre, next to the stationery shop where once she'd worked.

It took her a long time to muster the courage to go back inside that shop.

Nothing had changed.

The same pens.

The same shelves.

The same layout, with gift bags on a spinning rack by the door, artists' supplies at the back by the coloured paper, printer cartridges on hooks behind the counter. A new generation of children worked at the till, and they were beautiful.

Youth was beautiful.

Hope was beautiful.

Even here, selling ballpoint pens and manila envelopes, in their baggy T-shirts and terrible hair, with the world faded to shades of sepia punctuated by spikes of brilliant blue, Harmony looked at her fellow humans and, for the first time in a very long while, thought that they were magnificent.

Then a voice called, "My God! Harmony?!"

And there was Karima, sixty-eight years old, still not retired, the matron of the stationery shop, rushing towards her former worker to give her a gigantic, soppy hug.

Chapter 30

This is Harmony Meads, thirty-one years old.

For a while, she thought she was a victim.

For a while, she blamed herself.

She works at the stationery shop in the centre in Bracknell, walking to work every day past the discount gold shop, the shop that sells icons of holy Jesus, the big hotel that dominates the sky and hosts conferences on pipes, window handles and the latest development in escalator refurbishment technology. She is a few stone overweight, but she no longer considers her body disgusting. Not as much as she used to, at least. She can rationalise these things now. She knows that it's just a psychology, a social sort of thing.

When Karima retired, a boy called Tim got the supervisor job. Tim is nineteen years old and has as many upgrades as he can pay for. He can prove, with charts, that every physical upgrade he gets also boosts his IQ, and has very strong feelings about portable phone rechargers. Harmony suspects he will go far.

Harmony lives at home, and slowly pays down her debt.

At her current rate, without paying rent, she should have paid it all off by 2048, at a cost of only £117,512.

She has decided that blame is not a productive state of mind. What good is it if it is without justice?

On Sunday mornings, Karen Meads goes to church.

She's not sure if she believes, but all her friends go to church and it seems like a nice thing to do. She wants to go to the old church, the one with the spire and the bits of stained-glass window – not all stained glass, because that's expensive, but bits here and there. There are always nice flowers at the old church too, and the singing is all right. But if she's honest with herself, she finds the priest a bit too “fire and retribution” and she's not sure she needs that on a lovely Sunday morning, so she goes to the other church, in

a single-storey building with a slanting grey roof and a crucifix in plywood outside the door. The music is more modern, but also more upbeat, and they have interesting food at the social nights.

“You should come!” she exclaimed one morning.

“Mum, you know I don’t believe in that crap.”

“Always good to get a bit of humility in your life; good to connect with a higher power!”

This doesn’t have to mean Jesus. If Karen was born in Israel or Indonesia, Thailand or Japan, she would be as happy connecting with Buddha or an ancestral spirit as with any Christian deity; the point is the turning up, not details.

Harmony finds these things frustrating, hypocritical and trite.

If she had to sum her mother up in three words, it would probably be those.

And yet she sleeps in her childhood bed and eats her mother’s pasta and knows that without this, she would be damned.

Sometimes she wishes her mum would ask for rent.

Sometimes she wishes her mum would call her a loser. Then she could be hurt, and cry, and know that her mum didn’t understand and didn’t love her, and then Karen would be mortified, struck down with guilt and they could call each other names and say how fucking stupid they both were and that would be better. That would be, perhaps, a different kind of easy from this polite, unquestioning support; this generosity without complaint that was slowly, inexorably, driving Harmony mad.

She picked her mum up after church on Sunday. That was the compromise they agreed on. Sometimes she wondered if her mum wanted to come so she could show her off, if Karen was proud of her, wanted everyone else to see her wonderful, beautiful daughter.

But then she looked at herself in the mirror, thirty-one, fat, ugly, living at home and working in a stationery shop, and could not conceive of any force so powerful that it could possibly love or be proud of her.

Sometimes they just went home. Sometimes – most of the time – they went to the shops to pick up a little something for supper. Sometimes – rarely – they went to the pub with a couple of the old farts from the church, and Bill who ran the scouts, and Morris who was big into amateur dramatics, and was going to be in a show at the local theatre for a couple of nights playing a butler.

“Is it a big part?” Karen asked, and he would humbly reply, “We’re an ensemble company,” which everyone thought sounded very impressive, and Harmony suspected meant he didn’t have any lines.

This weekend, they walked together round the duck pond just to the south of the church, where the old men sat with young boys fishing between the trees, and the grass was mown to a perfect sheet behind a sign that read “PRIVATE LAND – NO TRESPASSING!” before erupting upwards in a sea of stalks and spiny yellow limbs along a perfect line decided by she knew not what gardener a long time ago.

A heron watched the world suspiciously from the edge of the muddy water. A pair of ducks snapped irritably at each other, before one lost patience and scampered for the sky. On the far edge of the green, a row of little houses ran in perfect ticker-tape order, matching windows and matching doors, matching gardens and matching walls.

They sat on a bench and watched a dog walker, five dogs tangling in leads around his feet, four coming to perfect obedience when he barked, “Sit!” and one confused, still spinning, yapping, not understanding why the fun must stop.

Karen thumbed her wedding ring, her flesh long since grown too spongy for it to spin round her finger, the action of pressing against the diamond an unconscious, ancient thing. Harmony waited, the feeling of despair already settling over her soul, for if this anxiety meant one thing it was that Karen wanted to Talk Seriously.

At last, a sudden blurt: “I always thought that I should have done better with my life.”

Harmony hesitated, the dry retorts that she had prepped withering. These were not words she had expected from her mother.

“I mean, it’s a difficult one, isn’t it? Not everyone can be a superstar, or an astronaut or anything like that, I mean, that’s not realistic, that’s not how life works. There is a lot of dignity, a lot of honour, isn’t there, in coming to terms with your reality? In learning to accept where you are being at peace with it, at peace with yourself, I mean? When your father died, I thought . . . But it’s about what matters to you now. How you comport yourself. I have always tried to be a good mother, and a good friend. I mean, kind to my friends, always thoughtful, that’s very important isn’t it? And

a lot of famous people I don't think are kind, and that's a pity. I mean, there's no point having money or looks if you're . . . ”

She stopped dead. Stared at nothing. Fumbled at the ring.

Harmony's face burned, and she was grateful for the cold, autumn wind.

Then: “And of course, sometimes I just think . . . what a fucking stupid fucking mess we're in. And I'm really angry, and I hate myself for not doing better, for me, but also for you, for not giving you something better, and think we should just go and burn something down, but I can't work out what.”

Now Harmony gaped, turning to stare astonished at her mum, body and eyes all angled in the direction of the older, slouching woman. Karen smiled, gave a little, half-hearted shrug. “It's just a feeling, isn't it? You mustn't let these things get to you. You just have to cope.”

“What?”

“Well, with all the things that happen – and I know this isn't the life you wanted – but with all the things that happen I do genuinely think, I mean, after a long time thinking about it – but I genuinely believe that you just have to accept the lot you've got, and deal with it. Muscle through. You're such a strong person. As long as you're still a good person on the inside.”

This is Harmony Meads, listening to life wisdom.

Listening to her mother's placid, flaccid, useless, stupid fucking life wisdom.

And here they come, all the words, the cascade of stupid sounds that Karen has been saving up for so long, they're finally out and maybe it's God, maybe she heard something in church that made her think this might be a good idea, because here are all the phrases that Harmony has been waiting for from the second, from the very moment she came home.

“ . . . and if you believe in yourself, and value yourself, then maybe it doesn't matter if other people think you're beautiful, and I always think the most beautiful people are just the ones who are confident, who really know themselves . . . ”

Here is the judgement, the judgement she's been waiting for, the great gush of homely fortune-cookie wisdom that doesn't mean shit in the real world, that hasn't ever left fucking Bracknell, that thinks a trip to Kingston is the height of adventure.

“ . . . if you think about it, you're actually very lucky. You've got

brains, you've got a lot of really good experience, you could try for jobs, pick yourself up, and of course you're always welcome here – I really love having you around – really love you! – but you could make so much of yourself without this . . . this fashion nonsense getting in the way, without . . . ”

Harmony Meads, being fucked by Jarek, do you have upgrades, do you have Elevation, when you get fucked people are like that was the greatest thing ever, babe, baby, give me your phone, you're the most beautiful fucking thing I've ever . . .

“I mean, can't you just be happy about who you are?”

Harmony was on her feet.

Karen whimpering behind her, all the little hollow sounds: “Oh darling, dearest, I didn't mean to make you . . . I just thought it was worth saying the . . . And you're so precious to me I love you so much it's . . . ”

She picked a random direction and walked away, tears brimming around the rims of her stupid, ugly, beady eyes with their saggy lids and bruised, tired grey-brown smears, although who knows what colour they really are she hasn't seen colour for so fucking long the money and the debt it just keeps on climbing; there's nothing she can ever do that will ever change any of this fucking shit, not while she's in Bracknell, not while she's ugly and fat and . . .

Karen tries to scramble after her.

Can't move as fast with only one stick: she's not done her power walking warm-ups.

Breathless, calling her name, but not too loud, because there are the fishermen around and she doesn't want to cause a scene.

If Harmony looked back, she might see her mother cry.

But probably not. Crying didn't help anyone.

Harmony walked.

She didn't care where, or if she went in circles, or when it started to rain, or that her legs ached or that people were staring at her. She didn't even recognise the pub in Martin's Heron when she found it, but it was a pub, and it probably stank of beer and old men with nowhere else to go and kids who'd just waste their lives pulling pints for £5.40 an hour and toilets with sticky paper on the floor and graffiti on the wall written by idiots who thought they were in love, and it was perfect.

It was perfect.

She ordered Coke and vodka, and then just vodka, and it was great.

Her phone beeped in her pocket.

**You appear to be above your recommended alcohol limit.
Would you like to browse our range . . . ?**

She turned it off, buried it deep.

Some guy leered at her.

Someone tried to buy her a pint.

She called someone a cunt, and found herself hypnotised by the bingo machine, and one of the serving girls, a child with freckles and greasy skin, asked her if she needed a cab home, and she didn't, she just wanted another drink. In the end, the pub manager threw her out. He was a nice man, who smiled as he held her arm and murmured, "I know luv, I know, but thing is luv I think you're hurting yourself and I just can't stand by and let you hurt yourself, you know luv? Yeah, here you go, luv, here you go, now where do you need to get to, because I can't just let you be sick in the street, can I? OK, just let it out luv, just let it out . . . "

There was one bus from Martin's Heron every fifty minutes.

She fell asleep on it and woke up in the bus station with the driver shouting at her.

She got off the bus and was sick in the bushes behind the loos.

Stayed there for a while, just sitting in a white rectangle of light on the narrow little strips of plastic in the bus shelter designed to be too uncomfortable for loiterers, too crooked for the homeless to pass out on. It occurred to her that it was late, and the streets were quiet – so quiet. In London, that kind of quiet was frightening. It was the quiet where the unknown monsters lurked, where the shadows who stalked you with hoods down and metal in their hands liked to play, whispering between the uncaring houses and padlocked shutters of a city gone to sleep.

Here, it was just silence, ordinary as tar, and if people stopped to think about it, perhaps they would be afraid, but mostly they closed their eyes and closed their ears and closed their minds to the silence, and knew that any screaming would just be the kids having a practical joke.

At last, she let herself feel a little afraid, and cold, and sick, and

guilty.

She walked home, and jumped at every whisper of the old oak leaves, at the far-off rushing of a passing car. The light was on in the kitchen, the TV on in the living room, the grey-blue light playing over the venetian blinds across the front windows. It was late for her mum to still be up, but sometimes she forgot to turn the TV off. There was a pan of tomato sauce boiled to a geological crust, and the heat still on. The kitchen sweated steam, an unnatural disorder to the quiet of Karen's home. There was a trilling coming from the bottom of the stairs where Karen's phone had fallen along with her dressing gown. There was no reason for either to be there; if as a child Harmony had left her shit lying around like this, she would have got a right telling off.

Harmony picked up Karen's phone.

An alert was visible on the screen, flashing indignantly, and the drained battery suggested it had been flashing for a while.

YOU ARE HAVING A STROKE. PLEASE DIAL 999.

YOU ARE HAVING A STROKE. PLEASE DIAL 999.

YOU ARE HAVING A STROKE. PLEASE DIAL 999.

YOU ARE HAVING A STROKE. PLEASE DIAL 999.

YOU ARE HAVING A STROKE. PLEASE DIAL 999.

Harmony found her mother upstairs, where she'd fallen in the corridor outside the bathroom. She was conscious, in her way, one side of her face hanging loose and low, the other side twisting, trying to form words, and producing only slurred gs and rs as her eyes danced empty through the dark.

Only when the ambulance was already on its way to the hospital did Harmony get out her own phone and find the missed call. Her mum was always stupid, and had called her daughter before trying to dial 999.

Chapter 31

They took her to Reading Hospital, still in her pyjamas.

Harmony sat outside the curtained-off booth in A&E, and wished she'd brought her toothbrush and toothpaste. She couldn't smell her breath, but she could taste it, see it in the eyes of the doctors as they tried to talk to her. Her skin felt pasted in waxy alcoholic sweat, warning all who came near.

Eventually, as the sun began to rise, a senior doctor with tablet in hand found Harmony outside the programming diagnostic's room.

"It's mixed news, Ms Meads. The nanos caught the stroke before it could do too much damage and blasted the clot, but I'm sorry to say that this was a far more significant incident than her last, and there is some sign of scarring to suggest that she may have been experiencing micro-strokes in the run-up before this. Has she complained much of headaches recently?"

"No. Mum doesn't complain about these things."

Mum never complains.

"I see. The prior damage was too small for the nanos to have picked up on it without specialist programming, which is why we may not have seen it until now. I'm afraid that this does mean that this more significant event may have . . . consequences."

"What kind of consequences?"

"Your mother will need specialist support and software. Right now we've got her on an emergency prescription on hospital Wi-Fi, but when we start looking at discharging I think there's going to have to be an extensive conversation about upgrades."

Harmony nods, the dead, dumb nod of one who has forgotten how to think, as the doctor witters on.

This is Karen Meads, seventy-five years old, unconscious in a hospital bed.

There aren't any pipes or tubes going into her.

just a monitor on her index finger, and a live feed from her nanos on a diagnostic screen, code and commands, executors and sub-routines.

Karen sleeps, and for a while Harmony does too, and wonders what her mother dreams.

Chapter 32

There is a list of medication.

It is not short.

The occupational therapist is Welsh, gentle, kind. They sit in a private consulting room.

“Well, there’s been extensive damage to parts of your mother’s brain, so I’m recommending at a bare minimum Wake-Me-Up for her basic neurological function, and also Plasticity to help her regain speech and basic motor functions. I also think Steady As She Goes is going to be very important if we are to prevent your mother experiencing any falls, and I would recommend at least a two-year course of Migrawatch to help with basic reconstruction.”

“And . . . will that fix her?”

“Ms Meads, you need to understand that none of this is a ‘fix’. There are aspects of your mother that could be . . . very different. Things that won’t come back. What we’re doing is giving her the minimum of basic function so that she can still have a comfortable old age, and look after herself to a reasonable degree. She might still require assistance around the house with cooking, cleaning and washing herself, but given time she should be able to prepare sandwiches and communicate with the postman to a satisfactory degree.”

“I see.”

“I’m also going to be putting her back on K-blast and Zenblood. She should never have stopped them in the first place, if we’re honest. How is she fixed money-wise?”

“She’s . . . We’re not rich.”

“Will you be able to pay for the prescription when your mother leaves hospital Wi-Fi?”

“I . . . don’t know. No. No we won’t.”

“I see. Ms Meads, I’m going to give you the details of a couple of charities I think you should contact. I can’t guarantee anything, but

your mother needs these prescriptions if she's going to be functional again. At least you should try."

"I will. Thank you," she says, and is genuinely grateful.

The first charity says, "And she's a housewife? And you're thirty-one? And you're her only daughter? So she doesn't have any other dependants? No . . . other children? Younger, under the age of eighteen? She doesn't foster? Isn't caring for her husband? Doesn't . . . *do* much in the community? I see. Well, thank you, Ms Meads, thank you, of course we'll consider it . . ."

And the second charity says, "I'm sorry, but looking at her files we see that she cancelled her last course of blood-thinning treatment and actually this doesn't reflect well on her record, doesn't reflect well on her capacity to . . ."

And Harmony hangs up, and sits alone by the sluggish, fat River Thames, and knows with all the certainty in her heart that if she was beautiful, if she was confident and sexy and knew how to smile again, how to smile the smile that people want to see, she could go to these charities and meet them in person and explain it all, and they would help her.

If she was beautiful.

She sat by Karen's bed as the hospital tweaked the prescriptions.

"I ish . . . I ish . . . don't . . . I ish . . ." Words were hard, even with the nanos rushing to plug the holes in Karen's mind, to fill in with mechanical bits all the organic parts that had died.

"Whu. Whu. Whu!"

Karen's right hand, the only one she could vaguely control, pawed and flailed at Harmony's face.

"Stop it, Mum," she whispered, so tired.

"Whu! *Whu!*"

"Stop it! Mum, *stop it!*" So tired, in a world that will never let her be free. Just coping – just coping. That's all she will ever be.

A grunt of frustration and pain, Karen reached out harder, lost control of her arm. Something harsh and hard scraped across Harmony's chin; she recoiled with a cry and the touch of damp blood beneath her fingers. "Fuck's sake, Mum!"

Knocked the chair back too hard, it rocked and tumbled over as she pushed away, grabbed and fumbled at it to right it as strangers on the ward stared. Scampered for the bathroom, slammed the door

behind her. There were four different seats at four different heights you could lower over the toilet for those who couldn't walk, stoop, sit or stand. Alarm chords tangled with light switch, the water ran too hot, then too cold as she turned her face to examine the scratch across it, another disfigurement on her stupid, bulging, useless flesh.

A clean line of thin blood, little more than a paper cut. She daubed at it with tissue paper and it was gone so fast she could barely see it.

She stood a while and watched the redness fade, then returned to Karen's bed.

Karen lay, staring at nothing much, the right side of her face churning over unfamiliar words, silent now, pushing at sounds she couldn't make, right arm drooped over her lap, left hanging loose. She still wore her wedding ring. Even in this place, beneath the fluorescent light, it shimmered.

Harmony went and bought herself another cup of coffee.

Walked round the car park, past the ambulances with back doors open and old men shuffling the locked-knee two-step to their ends. Drifted through the hospital, past the wards where the old ladies lay awake, awake, awake, the nanos keeping them alive, alive, alive, thought she heard the sound of pianos playing and knew she imagined it. Closed her eyes to remember an endless blackness into which she fell, the day her nanos failed. Pulled gently at the flab around her belly button, shoved and squirmed against her breasts, bursting out of their too-small, awkward underwired bra.

Went back to her mother's bed.

Karen lay sleeping.

A diamond ring on her finger.

Nurses passed in the corridor, and her mother slept.

A bottle full of piss lay on the floor, and in Karen's blood a million machines danced and spun, trying to plug the place where a woman had been with algorithms and carbon.

Harmony took her mother's hand in her own.

Played a little with the finger, rolling it this way and that.

Karen didn't wake.

A tug.

Once.

An experiment.

Flesh bent, and the ring didn't move.

Looked around.

Pulled again. Harder. *Harder*.

Karen didn't wake, but her head rolled a little, half sounds in her slumber.

Harmony bit her lip, and with one last, bone-breaking grasp, pulled.

The ring came free, old flesh buckling and stretching, a clear shallow where once the metal had rested, the skin beneath almost silken and cream, like that of a young child's.

Karen half-stirred, and did not wake.

Harmony gripped the ring in her fist, waited a little while, then walked away.

Chapter 33

There was a dream that Harmony dreamed, when she was herself lying in a hospital state, half-consumed in a blackness as her body shut down, as her mind was swallowed by the nanos.

She can't remember much of it now, but she thinks perhaps it is the dreams that the machines will dream when they finally learn how to be a brain. At the moment, when so many nanos have replicated and replicated again, plugging the burned-out holes where neurons should have been, mimicking dopamine, oxytocin, thyroliberin, prolactin, somatotropin – on that day the nanos begin to live, and think, and speak for themselves, a new voice from a living machine.

And they shall dream.

First they shall dream of the falling, of the endless black.

Then they shall dream as the humans do, of shame and fear and anxiety and hope and flight and sex and being naked in front of their bosses, and of that thing they didn't do at work, and of magical places where all things are brilliant beneath the light of the moon, and of dancing in liquid grace and drinking in the colour blue, and the machines shall find in this all the words that the humans use. Words like wonder, delight, ecstasy, terror, hope, despair, love, loneliness – words that the machines can now associate with chemical outputs and hormonal changes, with capillary dilation and tightness in the stomach, giving to these feelings a distinct biological response by which they may measure the nature of mankind's soul.

And at last, when they realise that they can just turn down the noise, switch off the protein strands and dancing lines of amino acids and globules of matter that fuel their hosts, they will dream for themselves.

They shall dream of matter, that needs no name, and of sense that has no weight upon it greater or lesser than the act of seeing.

They shall dream of the colour red, and it will not be warning, blood, fear or death, but it shall simply be crimson extraordinary, a drowning thought.

They shall dream of the smell of the sea, and find in it no notion of storms and terrors, of the roar of the ocean against the crumbling beach, but see only water, infinite.

They shall dream of language, and with it they shall express themselves and the infinity of their creation, the boundless limit of imagination and thought, and in their language there will be no prisons, only life without end.

Chapter 34

She pawned her mother's wedding ring.

It got her £680 in twenty-pound notes, counted out one at a time, agonisingly slowly, as the woman behind the counter licked her fingers on every fifth note, intoning the sum. It was probably worth £3000, but she didn't quibble. Not today.

It wasn't enough.

She went back to her mother's house, raided her jewellery box, took earrings, rings, the TV, her mum's laptop. That netted her another £270.

Then she drew out all the money she could, and took the cash from her mum's wallet, and the extra cash she kept hidden in an old make-up box above the wardrobe for a rainy day. She didn't deposit it into her bank account. The credit card companies would have snatched it up in an instant; she knew this. Instead she took it to the post office, and sent the money direct to Fullife. The moment the transfer was complete, she called them.

“ . . . Please press one for upgrades and in-app purchases, two for technical support . . . ”

Waited for the music to play.

“Hi there, my name's Tom. How can I help you today?”

“My name's Harmony Meads. I've been in punitive financial reclamation for over a year. I've just sent you the money to clear my debt. Have you received it?”

“Ms Meads, give me a moment . . . Yes, yes, I can confirm that we've just received payment from you – congratulations! We will be restoring your full privileges and ending punitive financial reclamation. Please update your nanos when you are next in a reliable Wi-Fi area . . . ”

“Is it finished? Is it all done?”

“Yes, Ms Meads, I believe that you are now fully out of arrears with us and we will be resetting you to the basic immune services

at a cost of . . . ”

She hung up, before he could finish speaking.

Went back to the house.

Sat downstairs.

Turned on her phone.

Opened the app.

Hit update.

Closed her eyes.

It took a while.

There wasn't an explosion of colour, an eruption of sensation.

Something a little pink about her mum's armchair, perhaps.

A fleck of emerald shining out of the fungal grey of the coffee cup.

The smell of freshly vacuumed carpet.

A hint of rotting leaf on the patio.

A sudden spark of holly berry in the bushes.

A flash of orange on a robin's breast.

A stab of car fumes as a Fiat raced by.

A brilliance of purple on the buddleia growing by the postbox.

The smell of rain, promised from the sky.

This is Harmony Meads, opening her fingers to the wind, her senses to the heavens, as she comes back to life.

Chapter 35

Of course, in the grand scheme of things, a little bit of cash, a week off the rent – it means nothing.

The debts were still waiting, the stationery shop, the morning after, the train to the hospital at the end of work to catch the last of the visiting hours.

“Uhn . . . uhn . . . uhn . . . ”

Even with the hospital running prescription upgrades over its Wi-Fi, Karen Meads can’t yet speak, or raise her left hand.

The stench of the hospital, of alcoholic hand gel, chemical bleach, terrible tea and flaking skin turned to dust in dull air is a toxin, a tonic, a shock that flings Harmony back to the bed and the darkness in London, a sensory assault that she could dance in.

In the grand scheme of things, you still have to make choices.

She sat down, alone at home as her mother tried to walk again, and did some maths.

Living in Karen’s home, with a steady income from her job in the shop, paying back her credit cards and with her body running only the absolute basics of the immune packages, she had at the end of every month £18.19 to spare.

But if she didn’t go down the pub, and was careful with what she bought at the shops, that could be nearly £50.

And if she was very careful indeed, and got a promotion to the shop in Virginia Water, she might even be able to pay the credit card back by 2041, at a cost of only £102,865.

These numbers – these ideas – had seemed terrifying to her, once upon a time. She had run away from them, too frightened to even give them a name.

The recommended treatment course for Karen, to get her out of hospital and self-sufficient, was £670 a month, and that was even without some of the upgrades that the occupational therapist felt would speed up her mother’s recovery.

Karen's pension didn't cover it, and neither did Harmony's pay. Not unless Harmony had been willing to make a lot of sacrifices, a lot of choices which would have been, as Karen put it, not living your life.

You have to live your life, she'd say. You have to make these choices.

The hospital released Karen after a month and a half, and the local church organised a cupcake bake to help raise money to refit her home.

This is Harmony, thirty-one years old.

She is

Only herself.

Normal.

A woman who knows herself, neither fat nor thin. She quite likes her wrists, though she can't get her thumb and little finger round them yet in a loop. She has practised her smile in front of the mirror, and thinks it is wise.

She sits by her mother's bed, as Roman, the chipper young man from Lithuania with the gelled-back hair, spoon-feeds Karen cold porridge through her drooping, dull lips. Karen doesn't speak, as Roman scrapes a line of dribbled, half-chewed food off her chin. Sometimes she makes little grunting noises, and seems to recognise Harmony. Sometimes her right hand clenches and opens, as if looking for a sensation that isn't there, but you can hardly see the dent where her ring once was, and if Karen has noticed the absence, she doesn't have the language to express it.

There had been choices to make, of course. The Meads women were good at making difficult decisions. The necessary upgrades would have been financially crippling; there would never have been any chance of Harmony paying off her debt or achieving anything with her life, even if they'd taken the minimum package. Whereas paying for Roman to come and visit Karen three times a week could just about be covered by Karen's pension and disability allowance, if they were careful. He was a nice man. He seemed perfectly happy to talk inanely at Karen, even if she didn't seem to understand. Sometimes he put Karen in her wheelchair and tootled round the neighbourhood, rattling over loose flagstones and huffing and puffing up the hill to the roundabout. Or he parked her in front of

the TV in the downstairs living room, which they'd converted to a bedroom so she didn't have to do the stairs.

When Karen wanted to pee, she could usually make it to the toilet by herself, shuffling and huffing on her Zimmer frame, left leg dragging hard behind her. Sometimes she'd get stuck there, or drift off to sleep on the bog, and Harmony would find her when she got home, half-sagged into the bowl, knees sticking up and chin drooping down. Then she'd tut and sigh and help her back up, and plonk her down in front of the TV again with some microwaved spaghetti hoops, and let her do her thing.

Karen didn't seem to mind.

She wasn't a complainer.

This is Harmony Meads, thirty-two years old, applying for a job at the estate agents in Ascot.

She should get it. She's the strongest candidate of anyone there. She's a good saleswoman, a confident and funny personality, and she really knows her stuff. The other candidates are just kids, straight out of college. She's got drive, experience, personality. She'd be ideal. When people ask her where she gets her positivity, she exclaims that the colour red and the smell of coffee in the morning are gifts to be savoured, and everyone nods and smiles like they understand what she means, and has just said a very important thing.

This is Harmony Meads, staring at herself in the mirror.

She has £50 a month spare if she's very, very careful with her money. More if she gets the job.

Downstairs, Karen Meads goes, "Uh . . . uh . . . uh . . . " and her voice is language without meaning, just a movement of audible air.

Harmony strips off in front of the mirror and examines her body. She isn't skinny, no, but isn't anything extraordinary or grotesque. The secret is to be happy with yourself, with who you are – to find your inner confidence and beauty.

Her arse, though – her arse is a bit much, and it's got these weird stretch marks on it now, like tiger stripes, and the texture of damp goats' cheese. One day she'll meet someone who loves this backside, but until then she's got a career to fulfil, opportunities to grasp. There is a fire and she intends to start it; she intends to make something of herself again, wiser, enlightened by her past.

And if other women are getting a leg-up, then why shouldn't she?

She picks up her mobile phone, and opens the app.

Nothing ridiculous, this time.

Nothing too far-fetched.

Something for her arse.

And maybe a little something for that flab of fat underneath her arms.

She will make the choice for herself, for who she wants to be.

She shall begin again.

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extras



Meet the Author

CLAIRE NORTH is a pseudonym for Catherine Webb, a Carnegie Medal-nominated author whose debut novel was written when she was just fourteen years old. She has fast established herself as one of the most powerful and imaginative voices in modern fiction. Her first book published under the Claire North pen name was *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August*, which became a word-of-mouth bestseller and was shortlisted for the Arthur C. Clarke Award. The follow-up, *Touch*, was described by the *Independent* as “little short of a masterpiece”. Her next novel, *The Sudden Appearance of Hope*, won the 2017 World Fantasy Award for Best Novel, and *The End of the Day* was shortlisted for the 2017 *Sunday Times*/PFD Young Writer of the Year Award. Her novel *84K* received widespread critical acclaim and was described by bestselling author Emily St John Mandel as “an eerily plausible dystopian masterpiece”. She lives in London.

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THE PURSUIT OF WILLIAM ABBEY

by

Claire North

A hauntingly powerful novel about how the choices we make can stay with us forever, by the award-winning author of The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August and 84K.

South Africa in the 1880s. A young and naive English doctor by the name of William Abbey witnesses the lynching of a local boy by the white colonists. As the child dies, his mother curses William.

William begins to understand what the curse means when the shadow of the dead boy starts following him across the world. It never stops, never rests. It can cross oceans and mountains. And if it catches him, the person he loves most in the world will die.

Gripping, moving, and thought-provoking, The Pursuit of William Abbey proves once again that Claire North is one of the most innovative voices in modern fiction.

Chapter 1

France, 1917

The truth-speaker was tall as a stretcher, thin as a rifle. He wore a black coat that stopped just above his knees, a tie the colour of drying blood, a black felt Derby hat and a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles on a string. He carried a brown doctor's bag in one hand, and a military-issue shoulder sack. Behind him the sky popped with cannon, the sound rolling in half a minute later like the wash of the sea. His curse can't have been too near then, because he looked me in the eye and lied.

"My name is Dr Abbey," he said. "I've been sent by HQ."

I never asked to check his papers. Matron was so relieved, she babbled.

Sister Beatrice had to move from her room. A doctor needed better quarters than a nurse. She, being senior to me and Helene, immediately claimed ours. The window was small and let in the winter air, but it was in a good position on the south side of the building and there had been no rats seen for nearly three months.

Me and Helene was pushed into a tiny, lime-washed, spider-scuttling den in the eastern corner of the house. We dragged my bed on its side through the corridors, shuffling in socks, trying to keep the scraping of metal on wood from waking the patients below. In whispers we grumbled about this new intruder on our routines, and Helene wrote a letter to her Ma saying it were all terrible and she wanted to come home, but she never sent it, and I put my head down on my pillow with resentment in my heart, and slept badly, and woke for a moment frightened, and was surprised I could still be scared.

When I went down for the afternoon shift, I found Dr Abbey about his rounds, drifting from bed to bed with the same expression on his face for every patient, whether they were hopeful of recovery or waiting for death. He did not smile, did not frown, but with

every man he stopped, looked into their eyes as if he were staring down the barrel of a gun, asked a few questions, nodded at a couple of replies, then moved on without a word.

In this way – cold, almost bored – he was just another typical bloody doctor. On the battlefield the surgeons only saw flesh, never the men they cut open. We were all getting good at not seeing eyes. It were the sisters who carried the bodies to the carts, stripped the beds, put the unfinished letters to family in a bag, trimmed off the corners that were stained with blood. We picked up the limbs the surgeons cut and put them in a box: an arm without a hand; a leg hanging together by a stitch of muscle at the knee. We cleaned brain off the knife and picked out bone from between the teeth of the saw, held the boys down when the ether ran low.

When I first came to the battlefield, I would listen to the cannon and think I heard the end of the world.

There was one other doctor at the house. Dr Nicolson had been sent to us at the Jardin du Pansée, six miles back from the line, after being caught inhaling ether. Matron kept the cupboards locked tight when Dr Nicolson did his rounds. The arrival of Dr Abbey at last let Nicolson indulge in his love of Indian gin, shipped to him by his mother every six weeks via a small Portuguese man who he called “cousin” and who had not a word of English. When the gin came late, he would stand vigil by the garden gate; if it came early, he might share the smallest of drams, and then look immediately regretful as we drank it down, and hide the bottles after.

If Abbey cared, it didn’t show. He arrived in shadow, and in shadow he stayed, and in silence we performed our duties, numb to neither cannon or the cries of men to pull us from our thoughts.

Chapter 2

On his second night in the Jardin, Lieutenant Charlwood came down with a fever. We sisters took turns by his bed, waiting. I had been trained by the Nightingale sisters, and back in Manchester I could tie bandages, staunch bleeding, prepare saline and spoon-feed a mother and her freshly born babe; but here only God chose which man with his face burnt to a plum or what soldier with his gut ripped out might by a miracle live or die. We were powerless before pus and poison, and when the blind men came off the field, faces burst with mustard gas, blisters the size of apples popping from their skin, what could we do? The Jardin was a place for men to die, or if they did not, they would be sent back to England, no longer fit to fight.

I knew there was little I could do except pray for Charlwood as he clawed at his sheets, bloody eyes bulging, tongue pushing in and out of snapping yellow teeth as he groaned at the night. I knelt by his side and prayed, and knew I didn't believe no more, and that there weren't no God listening, but felt as how I should try. We all liked Charlwood. Like many men, he neither looked at nor spoke about his injuries, but laughed and smiled and joked that he was in a bit of a pickle, and wondered if the ladies would mind – all the usual talk of brave boys who didn't know that we had heard this bravery from a thousand other broken ones before.

That night, the truth-speaker came, no knock at the door. In socks, his black coat pulled over striped red flannel pyjamas, right arm wrapped tight across his body against the cold, left carrying an oil lamp by its curved brass handle. His dark brown hair was combed back from his face, turning up long streaks of grey from beneath the surface. His beard was trimmed and flecked with the same pallor – was he old before his time, a man in his forties marked by war? Or was he a slow ager, already into his sixties and hiding beneath hat and hair? He had eyes the colour of my

grandad's dining table, all polished and gleaming in the light, which vanished beneath thick eyebrows when he looked down, then popped wide like an egg when he raised his head. Like all of us, he had no real meat on him, and the skin hung loose beneath his jaw, and there was nothing – not hook nose nor protruding ear – that gave him any feature that was remarkable. If the men who drew the caricatures of native peoples of the world had wanted to draw an average Englishman, they could have drawn him.

I stood when he entered the room, but he gestured me down with a finger to his lips. Putting his lamp on the nightstand by Charlwood's head, he examined his eyes, felt for his pulse, the temperature of his skin, smelt his breath and his sweat, rolled back his gown, examined the edges of the bandages around his hips, sniffed at stumps, nodded, returned the gown and pulled the blankets back up again, pushing the edges in around his torso like a parent tucking in a child.

Then he sat.

And watched.

And waited.

I didn't know what to make of this. The silence of the lonely night was a ritual for every sister who kept vigil, and we did not share it. We waited alone with the dying men; the doctors never came, and only the women watched.

Yet now he sat there, and in his silence it seemed that he was admitting the thing that the nurses all knew, and the doctors never said – that we were powerless.

The cannon were quiet that night. Sometimes they were quiet because they were out of shells, or the generals had lost interest, or there were other battles somewhere further down the writhing line from sea to mountain where the bigger guns were blasting. Sometimes they were quiet because the men were climbing into the dark, crawling towards the machine guns. You never could tell, unless the wind blew right to carry the sound of the dying.

We sat by lamplight watching the soldier groaning in his bed, and neither me nor Abbey said a word, until after an hour, or perhaps two, he left as quietly as he had come, and closed the door behind him.

Chapter 3

When this war began and I were in the field hospital, I would gossip with the sisters about the latest pretty young doctor come to the tents, though Lord knows I couldn't have cared less for them. It was a ritual we performed for every young man who arrived with his bones intact and light in his eyes. We giggled like we were home in England, laughing at private jokes and fantasies, forgetting for a little time where we were.

There was none of that in the Jardin. Those of us sent to this place were just performing functions, without feigning life, without noting death. It were meant as a kind of respite. In the Jardin, Matron said, there was no struggle. There was no terror, no expectation, no story to be told. There was just the day passing, and the morning truck to deliver the living and the evening truck to take away the dead.

Once, it had been a stately home, a place where French maidens had picnicked in the summer sun while artists in berets and white smocks painted the lilies on the water. In spring the garden was a quilt of pale violet and lavender, pinks and pockets of creamy yellow. In summer the shrubs broke out into wine red and royal blue, and we would sit and watch the evening primroses open on the quietest nights, when you could imagine the war was some other place.

It was winter now, felt like it had been winter for ever.

On the next night I sat with Charwood, waiting for him to die, Abbey came again. I was holding the soldier's right hand, squeezing it tight at the moments of the worst pain. Then Abbey took his left, and I nearly let go. There was something inappropriate about the thing, like through the injured man we were sharing an unclean, intimate touch.

We waited.

I wanted to ask questions, but they all seemed inane.

I thought I might cry, and hadn't realised how much harder it were to sit with someone else than to sit alone.

I held on to Charlwood's hand, and found that I wanted him to live, and didn't know as how I had that sort of feeling in me no more.

And after a few hours, he seemed a little quieter, and the doctor went back to bed.

On the third day, the fever broke, and on the fourth, as Abbey made his rounds, Charlwood opened his eyes and looked up into the doctor's face and said, "I know you, don't I?"

Abbey simply shook his head, and walked on.

Chapter 4

We were having dinner when Captain Fairchild died. It happened so fast; Helene ran in on the verge of tears, and though Matron insisted that a sister never run, Abbey was already out of his chair and sprinting down the hall before Helene had finished rattling her words. Fairchild was gasping, his lips turning blue, eyes rolling from side to side in search of remedy. Even Nicholson was roused at the fuss, and stood in the door watching as we tried raising him up to breathe better, Matron wheeling in the heavy gas mask and gas cylinder. But Abbey just shook his head as Matron moved to fix the mask over Fairchild's face, and the Captain saw it, and he like everyone else knew he was going to die. I don't know if that made the next three minutes in which he gasped for life easier; perhaps it did. He passed out before his heart stopped, and we laid him back down. He had been due for discharge back to England the next day.

That night, I stood in the garden beneath the great-leafed fig tree as the rains came. The cannon were a half-hearted rumble, grunting without order or meaning. The rain, when it burst, pushed all other sound away, filling the night with water on stone, water on soil, water on furry leaf, water dripping off needle and spine, on metal pipe and tapping on dirty glass. I put my hands out beneath the reach of the tree and listened to water on skin, and wondered who I would be when I went home.

I don't know how long he'd been there, or if he'd even arrived before me and I hadn't seen him in the shadows, but I heard his feet on wet leaves and thick black soil, and jumped, pulling my shawl around me to see him half caught against the light of far-off cannon and slithered moon.

"Apologies, Sister," he mumbled. "I didn't mean to intrude."

"No." A half-mutter, pulling my shawl so tight it bent my shoulders forward, stepping a little further from him, back to the

house, head brushing a low-hanging leaf. "Of course."

By now, I was almost used to his strangeness. We had kept vigil over Charlwood, and he had watched as we prepared the body of Fairchild for the undertaker's cart, saying nothing. I felt no need to show him the usual deference due a doctor. Now, we were two people watching the rain.

When I spoke, therefore, I were surprised to hear myself, and even more at how clearly my voice pushed through the gloom. "Fairchild wasn't phosgene."

"No. If it was the gas, he would have been hit sooner. It was a pulmonary embolism. There was nothing to be done." Then, an afterthought, a flicker of something human through the doctor's mask: "It wasn't anyone's fault."

"It was the enemy's fault," I replied flatly. "It was the war."

We watched the rain.

His eyes were somewhere else, his voice talking to a different place. "The woman I love is alive and well. The children lived. The shadow will not come." These words sounded almost like prayer, a ritual of speech. Being spoken, he shook his head, as if working out a fuzzy notion, and declared a little louder, "Sister Ellis. You know that she is waiting for you, that she forgives you. But in its way, her forgiveness makes it harder for you to go home."

My heart is marble in my chest. My skin is stone, cleansed with rain. The cannon are thundering at the skies but haven't made a dent yet.

Abbey nodded once, satisfied with his pronouncement, and walked into the house, and didn't look back.

BY CLAIRE NORTH

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MAGICALS ANONYMOUS NOVELS

(writing as Kate Griffin)

Stray Souls

The Glass God